

A Continuing Study on Integration Into Higher Education

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Abstract

The Japanese higher education system is under a great deal of pressure from the country's falling population, leading to a need for universities to maintain high student retention. At the same time, relaxed entrance standards caused by increased competition for the shrinking student pool mean that more students are being accepted to university from non-traditional populations, both first-generation students and students from high schools without a long history of university admissions. Both groups are less prepared for moving to university life than many students even a single generation ago, leaving them to struggle with the beginning of their university study.

This paper will describe some of the activities and policies put in place at the university and departmental level to assist students with this transition at a university in Japan which sees a high number of the high-risk students described above. These policies aim to ease the transition to higher education and assist students in achieving the levels of academic success and social integration needed for retention. The study investigates how students, and especially those students more at-risk for struggle and leaving, react to and take advantage of these programs and policies. The paper will finish with a preliminary assessment of these programs and policies, with suggestions based on both student feedback and faculty discussion of how they might be improved to further improve students' experiences during their first months at university.

Key words

Higher Education Studies, Student Retention, Equity in Higher Education,
First Generation Students, High-Risk Students

1 Introduction

That Japan is an aging society is an indisputable fact; it is expected that by 2025 more than one-third of the total population in this country will be aged 60 or older (Kalache, Barreto, & Keller, 2005). The effects that this change is expected to have on the country as a whole are great, and the effects on the Japanese higher education system are no less weighty. The Japanese higher education system faces double pressures of a pool of potential students that has shrunk a great deal over the past

20 to 25 years, and a higher education system that has continued to grow following policies of expansion initiated before the turn of the century (Amano, 2010).

Chubu University, like all universities in Japan, has felt these pressures, and much university policy is aimed at keeping the university healthy and viable in what Trow (2010) and others would describe as a universal-access context. To maintain enrollment numbers in this environment, the Department of English Language and Culture has

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found itself relaxing entrance standards, accepting students from backgrounds who until recently would not have been given the opportunity to attend university, and are not as well equipped for university life as their peers a generation ago.

The faculty of the Department of English Language and Culture believes that we are preparing incoming students for this transition to university life and are creating a positive environment to foster student success. However, there has been little opportunity to verify these impressions, especially with the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 epidemic beginning in 2020. This is the foundation of this research: a desire to learn more about the students entering the English Department, and how well they are being served with assistance in the transition into university life.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Higher Education in a

Universal-Access Context

The number of young people in this country continues to drop as the population ages, while higher education continues to grow. Coupled with reliance on fresh high school graduates to fill the rolls of first-year students and a strong resistance to opening up admissions to non-traditional students in great numbers, the system of higher education finds itself facing a situation in which more than half of 18-year-olds in the country continue on to higher education. Trow (2010) wrote extensively about the effects that increasing access to higher education could be expected to have on a system of higher education, the institutions within it, and the broader society in which it is situated. Central to Trow's thinking about higher education is a move from a "mass" system of higher education to a "universal" one as total enrollment of the relevant age group passes roughly the 50 percent mark. Most relevant to the issues this study seeks to examine are changes in society's ideas about access to higher education, the functions of higher education, the student career, academic standards, and questions of access and selection (Trow, 2010). In a universal access setting, there is essentially a place in the higher education system for any person who wants one,

providing they meet minimal educational qualifications. This means that the question for most students is not necessarily whether they will attend university, but rather which university they wish to attend.

As access continues to increase, more and more students will continue on from secondary school to university not because they necessarily want to, but because they feel they must. This has carry-on effects on which field of study they choose, how they approach that choice, and their motivation once their studies begin. As more students come from backgrounds not traditionally oriented towards university, fewer will have the support structures, or the academic and social backgrounds, that assist this transition to university.

Additionally, with the expansion of admissions to include students from non-traditional backgrounds, a greater proportion of first-generation students, neither of whose parents attended university, can be expected to enter university. The question of first-generation students at university has been studied extensively (see for example Tym et. al., 2004), with the general expectation that first-generation students will be less prepared for university academically, have less knowledge of systems and institutions, and have more difficulty becoming used to university life after beginning their studies.

2.2 The Transition to Higher Education and Student Retention

The issue of new-student success at many universities is often framed and approached in terms of retention. Particular attention is paid at Chubu University to students in their first semester of study, and a number of policies are in place to help ease their transition into the university community and ensure that faculty are mindful of metrics such as attendance and rates of absence-taking and dropout. The goals of these policies are on one hand to help the students themselves, and on the other to help faculty be aware of students who might be in danger of leaving, allowing them to work proactively to keep these at-risk students in the system.

Tinto (1988) wrote extensively about these issues and how they are related to success especially in the

context of the retention metric, and in particular how the successful transition from secondary school to university, not only in terms of academics but also in terms of social standing and self-image, is not only critical to success at university, but operates within a rather small window, the passing of which may leave students unable to successfully integrate into the university setting, and more likely to fail to complete their studies.

2.3 Students in the Japanese “Universal Access” Setting

To summarize, Trow and Tinto's theories as applied to the Japanese context suggest that we can expect that, especially in the private sector, an increasing number of students will be coming to university from educational and socioeconomic settings which are not traditionally university-track, are not as well-prepared academically or socially as students from previous generations, with less-robust family and social support or information networks. It is the goal of this study to examine the experiences of students in the Department of English Language and Culture through this lens.

3 Description of the Study

This paper describes the first two stages of a planned longitudinal study to track students' academic and social experiences in the first few months of university life and beyond. The goal is to create a picture the department can use to accurately assess departmental to help incoming students with the transition from secondary schools to higher education, paying particular attention to students from backgrounds which the literature suggests would leave them less well-prepared for this transition, and therefore more likely to struggle in their critical first few months at university.

The study began with a survey of 33 first-year students in the Department of English Language and Culture beginning in Spring semester 2024 (Laurence & King, 2025). This initial survey was given at the end of their first semester of study, and included questions about:

- Self-image as a student and educational background of parents and peers

- How students approached the decision to attend university, the decision to study English, and the decision to attend Chubu University's Department of English Language and Culture
- Academic experiences in the first semester
- Social experiences in the first semester

The second stage of the study, in Spring 2025, gave a follow-up survey to students in the first cohort and additionally expanded to include the new first-year students who entered the department that year.

4 Analysis

4.1 Educational Background

In the first cohort, 8 students (24%) were “verifiably” first-generation students, meaning that they were certain neither of their parents had attended university of any kind. An additional 6 students (for 42% total) answered that they “did not know” if one or more of their parents had attended university, which we believe means that they could reasonably be included in this group of students. Additionally, 14 students (42%) indicated that half or less of their high school peers went on to university, suggesting that they were coming from secondary schools with a less-strong tradition of tracking students into university study, or at least were involved in peer groups that did not generally take advantage of this track.

The second cohort answered similarly, with 6 out of 40 respondents (15%) “verifiably” first generation and an additional 5 students (for 25% total) not knowing if one or more parent had attended university. Additionally, fully 67% of these students indicated that half or fewer of their high school classmates attended university. That is to say, while there are some differences in specifics, both cohorts had significant numbers of what we might classify as our most “at-risk” students, coming from family and educational backgrounds which have prepared them less well for university study than other students.

4.2 Social Integration in the Department

When asked about their social integration with other first-year students, subjects in the first cohort generally answered positively: 18 students

(55%) reported that half or more of their friends were Chubu University students (although a worrying 5 students, for 15%, reported that “none” of their friends were Chubu students), and 23 students (70%) reported that they had positive or mostly positive relationships with other first-year students. Students reported similarly positive interactions with faculty, with 21 students (64%) reporting positive or mostly positive relationships with their instructors.

Some of these metrics saw little change when the cohort moved into their second year: 58% of the continuing students reported that half or more of their friends were from the English Department, and 62% reported positive relationships with their classmates in the department. Reported relationships with faculty, however, improved markedly: 100% of the students reported neutral-to-positive relationships with faculty, and 79% reported positive or mostly positive relationships.

The second cohort, perhaps unexpectedly, showed little change in these metrics from what their upperclassmen showed in the previous year. 62% reported mostly-positive relationships with classmates and 60% reported the same with departmental faculty.

On the other hand, only 11 students (33%) in the first cohort reported positive or mostly positive relationships with upperclassmen in the department, and all but one of the remaining students (21, for 64%) reported an ambivalent “neither positive nor negative” response to the question. Further tracking of this point will be necessary, but the relationships between classes has traditionally been seen as an important part of the character of the department which has, anecdotally at least, been harmed after the COVID-19 epidemic and its fallout. This did improve significantly in the students' second year, with 58% of students reporting a mostly-positive relationship with upperclassmen.

The second cohort again showed similar results to their seniors, with 40% reporting a positive relationship with upperclassmen and the bulk of the cohort, at 55%, reporting ambivalence.

The final important items on the survey concerned who students turned to with academic issues, and who they turned to with any other

issues. Multiple answers were allowed for these items, but for both students claimed overwhelmingly to turn to peers: for academic issues 64% of responses were a friend, either in the department (44%) or outside of it (20%), and for non-academic issues the number was 51%, evenly split between in-department and other friends. This is certainly unsurprising, as was the number of students who turned to family members for support (16% for academic issues, and 31% for other issues), but worrying to us was the number of students who responded that they turned to upperclassmen or faculty. Only 4% of responses for academic support were faculty, and 7% upperclassmen, while for non-academic issues it was 8% and 3% respectively. This last category showed significant change as the students moved to their second year, with 38% of respondents reporting that they turned to faculty advice with academic issues, and even 17% reporting the same for non-academic issues. The first-year cohort also showed significantly stronger relationships with faculty, with fully 30% reporting that they came to their instructors with academic issues.

Again, anecdotally the faculty in the department feel that the strength of the relationships between students and faculty, and between students of different academic years, is a particular strong point of departmental culture, which would work towards the sort of academic and social integration that Tinto suggests is so important to new students. In general, at this early stage of the study, results suggest that while students seem to be integrating smoothly as a class of first-year students, with friendships being formed among peers and reliance on one another for both academic and non-academic issues, but these connections with faculty and peer supporters would appear to be less strong than we would like.

5 Moving Forward

This is, of course, only the beginning of a planned ongoing study, so much will only be made clearer with the collection of more data over time. The plan is to track how different incoming classes' situations and experiences are similar or different, and how any changes to integrational and support policies and activities moving forward change these

experiences and outlooks as we move into a post-COVID environment and try to recover from what the researchers perceive as damage to the social structure of the department caused by the pandemic. We will also continue to track students' experiences through their academic careers to see whether time improves the areas these initial findings suggest are lacking.

The goal is to try to create a picture of how well we as a department are serving the students that the literature suggests are “at risk” for not succeeding academically or leaving university, especially first-generation students and/or those coming from high schools with less-rigorous preparation for university. We will try to follow both students who thrive in the department, and those who struggle, to try to get a clearer picture of how we are helping the former group succeed, and how we might be failing the latter.

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高等教育への統合に関する継続的研究

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要 旨

日本の高等教育システムは、人口減少による大きな圧力に直面しており、大学は高い学生定着率を維持する必要に迫られている。同時に、縮小する学生層をめぐる競争激化による入学基準の緩和により、非伝統的な層からの大学進学者が増加している。これには、大学進学者の第一世代となる学生や、大学進学実績の乏しい高校出身の学生が含まれる。これらの学生層は、わずか一世代前の学生と比べても大学生活への適応準備が不十分であり、大学での学びのスタートに苦勞している。

本論文では、前述の高リスク学生を多く抱える日本の大学において、大学および学部レベルで実施されている、学生の移行支援活動と施策の一部を説明する。これらの施策は、高等教育への移行を円滑にし、学生が継続に必要な学業的成功と社会的統合を達成することを支援することを目的としている。本研究では、学生、特に学業不振や中退リスクの高い学生が、これらのプログラムや施策にどう反応し、活用しているかを調査する。最後に、学生のフィードバックと教員の議論に基づき、大学入学初期の学生体験をさらに改善するための施策の改良案を提案するとともに、これらのプログラム・施策の予備的評価を行う。

キーワード

高等教育研究、学生定着率、高等教育における公平性、第一世代学生、高リスク学生