

## THE SHAPING OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN LONG DISTANCE EDUCATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ROLE OF REGIONAL STUDY CENTERS---THE CASE OF JAPAN

Fusao Tomita, The Open University of Japan, Japan

### Summary

*In order to have successful operation of The Open University of Japan (OUJ), OUJ needs to provide not only excellent curricula, but also appropriate placement of regional centers (Study Centers, SC), satellite spaces (SS), and sub-site study rooms (SSSR) and their substantial management. Especially in Hokkaido, cost-effectiveness is an important key to attract students, especially those aiming professional qualifications. Besides them, SC, SS and SSSR match greatly with Japanese culture of trusts and wishes through togetherness, for example schooling (face-to-face lectures) and students' extra-curricula activities at these sites. Cooperation with local government (city government) is also key to success operation of OUJ. Through these activities, OUJ provides lifelong learning and distance education, and it becomes the essential components of higher liberal art education in ordinary universities and local areas.*

### Introduction

The Open University of Japan (OUJ) was founded in 1983 and by 1990 OUJ opened regional centers (Study Centers, SC) in all the 47 prefectures, but four SC's in Tokyo resulted in 50 SCs in total. Besides SCs, seven satellite space (SS) were opened. SC and SS are designed to provide services for students to access recorded materials and other references to assist their study and to take exams and schooling (face-to face lectures). OUJ has 79,056 enrollments in undergraduate courses and 5,913 enrollments in master courses. Due to a long economic recession and decreases in young generations, Japanese universities are facing serious problems in decreasing of enrollments and OUJ is not an exception. Thus it is an urgent target to develop some measures to increase enrollment. In this paper, some successes to resolve the above subject by opening of regional study centers in cooperation with local governments in Hokkaido.

#### 1) Roles of SC, SS, and sub-site study rooms (SSSR)

Our SC and SS have been opened in order to provide good and equal opportunities to access recorded materials and other learning aids all over the Japan. However, Japan has many islands and also uneven distribution of population. For example, Hokkaido is the least densely populated area but has huge areas and Okinawa has a similar problem of population and also difficulties of covering many islands. Hokkaido has a larger area than combining Kyushu and Shikoku in which there are 10 prefectures (10 SCs and one SS), while Hokkaido has one SC and one SS. Thus sub-site study rooms (SSSR) were set up in 4 major cities; Rumoi in the north, Hakodate in the south, Kitami in the East, and Obihiro in the middle

areas as shown in Fig. 1. Those three SSSRs have almost the same numbers of enrollment. These SSSRs were operated in close cooperation with each city government. Cities provided space and assistant personnel from their own staffs. Thus it can be said that city governments are playing major roles in providing necessary resources.

2) The expansion of student enrollment in relation to the establishment of SSSRs

By setting SSSRs, student enrollment increased greatly (i.e. almost doubled in these areas), proving that cost-effectiveness is an important key to attract students, especially those aiming professional qualifications (such as nurses who can not take much free time for traveling a long distance to take courses).

3) SC, SS and SSSR match greatly with Japanese culture of trusts and wishes through togetherness

Japanese tend to have togetherness in nature. OUJ was set to provide schooling (face-to-face lectures) at SC and SS and also to provide space and time for students' extra-curricula activities. SSSRs were also set to provide similar activities as SC and SS, although frequencies and spaces are not quite similar as SC and SS. Even so, those activities function to encourage students to come to meet their colleagues and professors. In those areas, chances to meet professors are not plentiful and students and city government (board of education) welcome these activities. OUJ can function as a place for a higher education and this may be the true aim of OUJ for giving life-long learning and distance education. Especially for Japanese, face-to-face communication and also togetherness are important keys to attract people and match with Japanese life-style and culture.

4) OUJ may be and will be the essential components of higher liberal art education in ordinary universities through effective teaching through SC, SS and SSSR

Through effective and coordinate management of SC, SS and SSSR, OUJ can not only provide life-long learning and distance education, but also become the essential components of higher liberal art education in ordinary universities and in local cities. Having close relationship with students, OUJ can obtain demands in those areas and can provide the good quality of educational services to meet students' requests in each area. Needless-to-say, e-learning system and use of BS rather than CS will be an important key technologies to upgrade the current education systems of OUJ.

### Conclusion

- 1) Our SC, SS and SSSR are playing unique and important role in life-long learning and distance education in Japan to provide the good quality of educational services to meet students' requests.
- 2) Our SC, SS and SSSR match greatly with Japanese culture of trusts and wishes through togetherness, for example schooling (face-to-face lectures) and students' extra-curricula activities at these sites.
- 3) The expansion of student enrollment in relation to the establishment of regional centers; taking an example of Hokkaido SC indicates cost-effectiveness is an important key to attract students, especially those aiming professional qualifications.
- 4) The intensive guidance at regional centers, especially for graduation and master theses seems to be additional attractive nature of OUJ.

OUJ provides not only lifelong learning and distance education, but also it becomes the essential components of higher liberal art education in ordinary universities through effective teaching through SC, SS and SSSR.

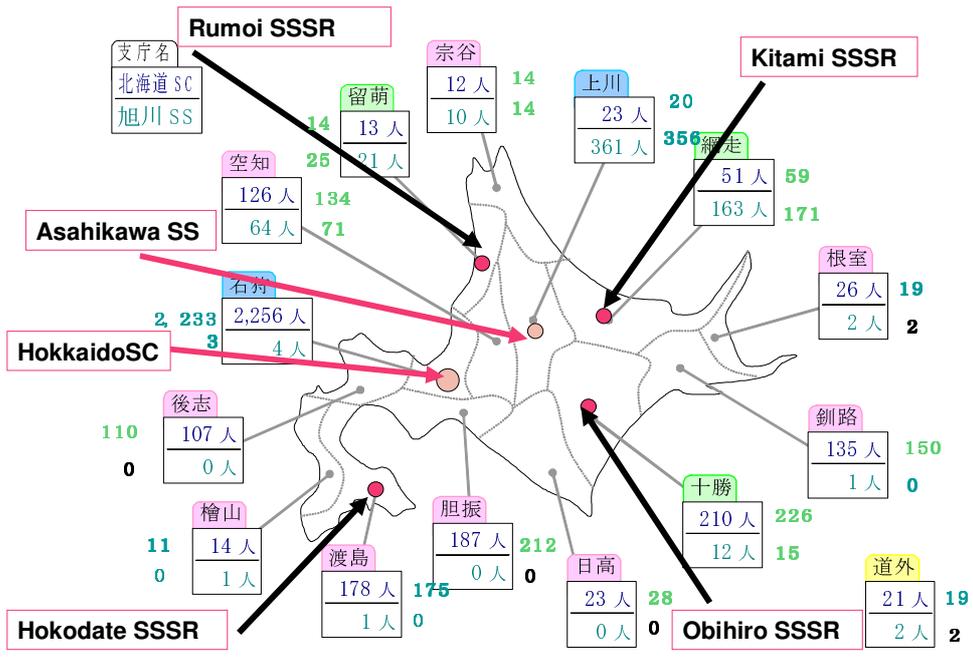


Fig. 1 Placement of service facilities and increase in enrollments