

Never Too Old to Learn

An aging population presents both problems and opportunities for the Japanese educational system, learns **Tony McNicol**.

In the three years since the NGO Senior University was established, over 500 amateur lecturers have signed up to give talks to audiences across Japan. Speakers, who are mostly in their early retirement years, can choose to talk on any subject they want. Deputy-director Fujii Keizo recalls how one speaker once brought “a big lump of something” with him. “What do you think this is?” the speaker asked, and let the puzzled audience pass it around. When no one answered, the speaker cheerfully told them, “It’s elephant poo.”

The charity dispatches twenty to thirty people a month to companies, community halls, and other venues, and like the ex elephant-keeper on the NGO’s books, many talk about their former jobs. There are ex pilots who talk about flying the

world, doctors who lecture about medicine, journalists who reveal the news behind the news. Since audiences, too, tend to be around retirement age, lecture topics are often geared towards the interests and needs of the elderly, such as health and money management. “From here on there are going to be a lot more senior citizens,” says Fujii. “The majority of them are fit and energetic. We wanted to find a way for them to contribute to society, which is why we set up this NGO.”

Speak Easy

It would be hard to think of a part of Japanese society that faces a bigger impact from the aging population than Japan’s education institutions. For one, a shrinking birthrate means that there are fewer and fewer children to attend Japan’s

schools and universities. In 1980 there were nearly 12 million elementary school pupils, but now there are only around 7 million. And pretty soon the number of university applicants could be barely more than the number of places available. The teaching profession itself faces a threat from the so-called year 2007 problem. It is set to lose a large number of skilled and experienced instructors when the 7 million Japanese baby boomers start retiring next year.

Yet, despite the challenges facing the education system, these same demographic changes may also bring opportunities. NGOs like Senior University are finding innovative ways to harness senior citizens’ enthusiasm for learning—and for teaching. In their small office in the Tokyo district of Akihabara, sixty-five-year-old Fujii explains how the NGO is run. Like their speakers, the NGO’s twenty staff are mostly early retirees, with an average age of sixty-five. When a lecture



Senior University's Fujii Keizo gives a talk at the JTB Culture Salon in Shinjuku, Tokyo. NGOs like Senior University are finding innovative ways to harness senior citizens' enthusiasm for learning—and for teaching.

is arranged, the NGO takes 10 percent of the typically 20,000 to 30,000 yen (260 dollars) speaking fee. In addition, the NGO funds itself with registration fees from lecturers; a biannual 2,000 yen fee for the first topic, and then 1,000 yen (9 dollars) for each topic after that.

Talks are held mostly in Tokyo and nearby areas, though the charity has also supplied lecturers for talks as far away as Japan's southern island of Kyushu and the northernmost island of Hokkaido. Of the 500 people registered with the charity, only about thirty or so people speak regularly, says Fujii. Local authorities will debate amongst themselves to decide who the most interesting speakers are, and good speakers can quickly find themselves in demand.

The NGO has featured in national newspapers, and word has got around to the local authorities. "We are getting more and more requests [for speakers]," says Fujii. Not only are the NGO's lecturers cheaper to hire than professional speakers, they are likely to have more in common with their audiences, stresses Fujii. "Our lecturers talk about their own experiences," he notes, "so the speeches are very down to earth and interesting."

Today, Fujii himself is giving a talk at the JTB Culture Salon in Tokyo's Shinjuku district. The topic is the connection between laughter and health. (According to the handout he distributes at the beginning of the lecture, as well as being a member of the NGO's staff, Fujii is "Vice-President of the Republic of Humor.") He shepherds sheepish latecomers to the seats at the front of the room, then opens with a question. "Does anyone have false teeth?" No one says anything. "Good, because you are going to laugh so much that they might fall out!" In his talk Fujii encourages his audience to learn and practice "corny jokes," enthuses on the health benefits of laughter, and occasionally hands out smiley fridge magnets to students who answer questions. He finishes by asking everyone to stand up and laugh out loud.

JTB, Japan's largest travel firm, opened the culture salon this April on the 33rd floor of a Shinjuku skyscraper. Set up to tap the growing senior citizen education market, the facility provides more than 100 typically weekly or bi-weekly classes, ranging from the history of Buddhism to harmonica lessons. Most of the students are in their fifties and sixties; about three-quarters are women. Manager Enomoto Satoshi says that it is part of efforts by the travel company to diversify their business, and is the company's sec-

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ond culture salon after one in Osaka.

University Challenge

Universities too are taking on a growing number of older students. Up to now there have been relatively few mature students in Japan, but that is changing, says Kozuki Masahiro, director of General Affairs at the University of the Air, a distance learning university. "Society is changing very quickly. Technology too. That means [adult students] have to keep collecting new knowledge."

The days when Japan's system of lifetime employment meant that workers would finish university, be trained by their company, and then never have to worry about studying again are long gone, says Kozuki. Now, workers are having to retrain themselves.

And it's not just those in employment, some retirees are also choosing to go back to school. And if sixty-three-year-old Okamoto Hisao is anything to judge by, the sky could be the limit for Japan's soon-to-retire baby boomers. Okamoto is the author of a new book, *Granddad Is a University of Tokyo Student*, due to go on sale in Japan this June. Speaking during a break between



classes, he explains how he didn't manage to get into university after high school, but found employment as a civil servant. Though he later gained a degree as a part-time student, Okamoto still felt there was something lacking in his life.

So, in his mid fifties he decided to pursue a long-standing interest in languages and became a student at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Not long after, he succeeded in entering Japan's most prestigious educational institution, the University of Tokyo, and now he is in his third year of a PHD about immigrant Japanese communities in Canada. "Normally people leave university and get a job; I did the reverse," says Okamoto. "I finally found a lifestyle that suits me."

His book is already receiving publicity in all Japan's national newspapers and is due to be published this June. It is a message of encouragement not just to Japan's baby boomers, but the country as a whole, says Okamoto. "Have a dream, and one day you will be able to fulfill it," he urges. "It doesn't have to be study... just find some kind of goal." ■

Tony McNicol is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Tokyo.