

Research Articles and Essays

Creation of a New Professional Position of "Assessor" in Japanese Institutions of Higher Education - Introduction to the University of Tsukuba's Assessor

Nakano, Y.¹, Takahashi, T.², Okazaki, S.³, Shinoda, H.⁴, Waki, T.⁵, Takeda, K.⁶ and
Sasaki, G.⁷

¹ Center for Diversity Accessibility Career Development, University of Tsukuba

² Faculty of Education, Shinshu University

³ Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Tsukuba

⁴ Faculty of Psychology, Rissho University

⁵ Center for Diversity Accessibility Career Development University of Tsukuba

⁶ Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Tsukuba

⁷ Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Tsukuba

Abstract

The number of students with disabilities enrolled in Japanese institutions of higher education has been on the rise in recent years, and the percentage of those with developmental disabilities is increasing. However, due to differences in the understanding of a given disability on the part of those providing the considerations, differences in the way records are tracked, the fact that a variety of conditions may be indicated by the same diagnosis, and the relationship between the specific functional impairment caused by a given disability, this matter has not been sufficiently investigated. In light of this, the University of Tsukuba, with the assistance of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), has created a new professional position of "assessor," with reference to the initiatives of universities and other organizations in Japan and abroad. In this paper, we will describe these initiatives and provide an overview of the position and the requisite skills.

Keywords: Japan, disability, higher education, developmental disabilities

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Current Status of Higher Education Institutions in Japan

According to 2021 statistics from the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), the number of students with disabilities enrolled in Japanese institutions of higher education has been increasing in recent years, with a particularly high percentage of students with developmental, mental, and internal disabilities. In Japan, developmental disabilities are typically considered to include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and Specific Learning Disorder (SLD). The United States has the largest percentage of SLD students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), while Japan has the largest percentage of ASD students (JASSO, 2022; Kondo, Takahashi, & Shirasawa, 2015).

In 2016, the Law for the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities came into effect in Japan; and in 2021, as a result of a partial amendment to the law, the provision of reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities became mandatory for all higher education institutions, including private universities. These initiatives contribute to a growing momentum to support students with developmental disabilities.

As the number of students with disabilities in Japan is increasing, and the need for development of a study support system for these students is more urgent than ever, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued the Report of the Study Group on Study Support for Students with Disabilities (Second Summary) (MEXT,

2017), which outlines important and as yet insufficiently addressed issues regarding the study of students with disabilities in higher education. Although "training and assigning personnel to provide support to students with disabilities" was cited as a major issue that each university should address, the overall assessment, selection and provisional system in Japanese universities is not necessarily adequate compared to other countries, especially due to a lack of personnel with assessment-related skills.

In the MEXT report, the following documents are listed as evidence that may call for reasonable accommodation of students with disabilities: certificates that include the type, grade, and classification of disability; medical certificates based on appropriate medical diagnostic criteria; the results of standardized psychological tests, etc.; the findings of experts on and off campus; and data on the status of support before entrance to university or other schools such as upper secondary schools and special support schools. In order to determine the appropriate content of consideration, explanatory materials (etc.), wherein the individual objectively comprehends and analyzes his/her own disability status, are also considered effective; and it is necessary to properly comprehend the disability status of each individual student by taking into account a composite of available evidence materials. However, it is important to note that, depending on the nature of the disability, it may be difficult to submit these materials. Thus, it is important to provide assistance to students with disabilities in obtaining evidence, and to consider providing reasonable accommodation regardless of the presence or absence of materials, if the need to remove social barriers is evident to the individual through constructive dialogue, etc. (MEXT, 2017).

Reasonable accommodation is defined, in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as "necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to

persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms." Similarly, Japan's domestic law, the Law for the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, stipulates that social barriers shall be removed "when a person with disabilities expresses the actual need for the removal of social barriers and the burden associated with the implementation is not excessive" (JASSO, 2018).

In terms of the current situation regarding reasonable accommodation at Japanese higher education institutions, though there is recognition of the need for such accommodation, there are differences in the understanding of disabilities and the ways the accommodations are tracked by those providing accommodation (instructors in charge of classes, universities and other higher education institutions, etc.), differences in the content of accommodation that can realistically be provided, among other factors. This situation is also influenced by the fact that there are individual differences in the conception of a given condition even with the same diagnosis. Moreover, the relationship between the functional impairment caused by a given disability and the content of considerations has not been sufficiently investigated (Matsuse, Sakamoto, and Matsuse, 2018). As a result, there is a need for "assessors," specialized personnel capable of properly assessing students' functional disabilities and study environment.

The Position and Importance of an Assessor in Japan

In Japan, the term "assessor" is currently used mostly in the fields of business and nursing care, and is still uncommon in the field of education, especially in higher education. The term "developmental disabilities" is gaining recognition in Japan, but there are still cases of misuse and misunderstanding. We believe that the training of specialized personnel (assessors) with the requisite professional qualifications for individual psychological and educational assessment in higher education institutions is an important issue.

The role and position of assessor in foreign countries seems very clear. For example, Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs), which account for roughly half of all students with disabilities in the United Kingdom, are determined by psychologists or specialized faculty with SpLD assessment qualifications (Ryder & Norwich, 2018). In the case of higher education institutions in the U.S., qualified psychologists, such as school or clinical psychologists, conduct psycho-educational assessments regarding developmental disabilities (Eurich, Krause, Cigularov, and Thornton, 2009).

In Japan, Osaka University is implementing advanced initiatives. Since 2016, the University has established a system to assess functional impairment using standardized objective assessment tools, and students who are found to have such impairment are addressed according to a systematic flow, including assessment of student needs and determination of their appropriateness (Suwa, Mochizuki, Yoshida, Nakano, & Kusunoki, 2017).

As mentioned, the number of students diagnosed with developmental disabilities enrolled in higher education in Japan is on the rise, and it is anticipated that an assessor, who will judge the needs of students and the appropriateness of their learning support needs, will

be positioned as essential professionals at universities and other institutions in the future.

On the other hand, considering the professional system in Japan and the resources available to each university, it can be assumed that the duties to be performed by such assessors will be very diverse. The primary role of the assessor will be to properly utilize objective assessment tools, as well as to properly interpret the results of assessments conducted at medical institutions outside the university, and to communicate and collaborate with the educational organization to which the student concerned belongs. In considering reasonable accommodations at institutions of higher education, in addition to determining the presence or absence of a disability and the student's functional impairment, it may also be necessary to assess various aspects, such as the organization of the educational program, the competencies positioned in each class, the resources available at each institution, support that does not conflict with the nature of the class, and an assessment of its appropriateness.

In particular, the basis for all assessments is consideration of problems in the learning environment, with a focus on assessing functional impairment, to determine effective methods of consideration and ensure educational equity. However, as noted above, regarding developmental disabilities, there are significant individual differences in the conception of a given condition, and cases where consideration is determined according to the general characteristics of the disability and the individual's claims, without a full functional evaluation. While overestimation of the importance of objective assessment tools should be avoided, making consideration decisions without adequate assessment of which, and to what extent, student functions are affected by the given disability may also deprive the student of learning opportunities and equity. While it is important to conduct such assessments, given the reality that universities in Japan face various constraints in conducting inspections (such as human and material costs), they may have to rely on findings from external organizations.

As a result, the specifics of how to proceed with this series of processes vary depending on the policies and resources of each university.

Initiatives to Create a New Professional Position of "Assessor" - Example of the University of Tsukuba

With the assistance of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the University of Tsukuba has launched an initiative entitled Implementation of Psycho-educational Assessment Functions to Maximize Performance of Diverse Students: Building an Advanced Study Support System for All Students, Including Potential Students with Developmental Disabilities. As a part of this initiative, a new professional position of "assessor" was created in Fiscal Year 2021 to support students' learning and assess students' diverse capabilities, with reference to the aforementioned initiatives of domestic and overseas universities and other institutions. The University of Tsukuba promotes understanding of students' individual developmental characteristics and career aptitude, regardless of whether they have been diagnosed with a developmental disability, and provides student assistance for guidance in the educational organization. One of these educational supports is "individual psychological and educational assessment."

"Individual psychological and educational assessment" is available on the website pertaining to support for students with disabilities at the University of Tsukuba, and students may request an assessment at any time. A system has also been established to conduct individual psychological and educational assessments to objectively evaluate students with high-support needs, as identified through a voluntary university-wide screening survey called the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire; this assesses their developmental disability

tendencies, intellectual abilities, and level of adaptation to social life. A full-time assessor with the necessary professional qualifications to conduct such assessments is assigned to conduct individual assessments of around 100 high support needs students each year. If the results of the assessment suggest that a student may have a developmental disability, we recommend the WEB-based Learning Support Book (LSB), a storehouse of student-designed techniques aimed at enhancing self-help skills. (Incidentally, the LSB, a WEB service that distributes support information, won a bronze award in the Communication Design category of the IAUD International Design Award 2020.)

Similarly, we may introduce or lend students support tools and applications or refer them on to staff responsible for academic support. The staff member in charge of academic support will liaise with medical and welfare institutions both inside and outside the university as necessary and may also provide consultation to educational organizations when educational considerations and support are needed. They also provide coaching (which we term “study-skill coaching”) when specialized academic support is deemed necessary.

In this way, an assessor plays an important role in supporting students, by interviewing them about their study environment in classes and learning assignments, conducting standardized psychological tests and other assessments, and providing feedback, which is positioned as a prerequisite for study support and reasonable accommodation. In addition to objectively assessing student functioning and interpreting how it relates to the student's difficulties and competencies, the assessor is also expected to develop support or considerations that can be implemented in the university environment, and explain these to the faculty and the student himself/herself.

Summary and Future Prospects

In Japanese universities, the percentage of students with developmental disabilities is increasing, and assessment is important to confirm the evidence regarding applications for support from such students, and to better understand their individual characteristics. However, consideration of the content of such support, and the provision of reasonable accommodations, are currently left to the individual efforts of faculty and staff at each university, etc., and it is believed that some faculty and staff find it difficult address the needs of such students.

It is important to share the results of standardized psychological tests and other assessments, as well as the difficult situations faced by such students, with the staff in charge of support for study and the teachers in charge of classes, etc., to determine adjustments that can be made to the considerations that the assessor discussed during the interview, in order to make adjustments to the environment during class time, etc., and link these to study considerations.


However, many questions remain: how to establish a study support system and conduct assessments appropriately with limited resources and human and material costs, where and from whom to request assessments when it is difficult to conduct assessments on campus, how to utilize the assessment results obtained, and how an assessor is expected to be involved and fulfill their responsibilities in the assessment process—these questions are still in the process of being answered in Japan.

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