

Research Articles and Essays

**Recent Trends in Supporting Students with Developmental Disabilities in
Japanese Institutions of Higher Education**

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Abstract

The existence and role of assessors for students with developmental disabilities remain debated in Japan. This study examines the skills and competencies needed for professionals supporting such students in higher education institutions, including universities, junior colleges, vocational schools, and technical colleges. Assessors in Japan must act as generalists, adapting their roles to assess functional disabilities, coordinate casework, and engage with students. They also need to understand the educational philosophy and organizational structure of their institutions.

With the increasing number of students with developmental disabilities, training programs for assessors are critical. We propose three core skill categories: understanding students and institutions, collaborating with internal and external organizations, and conducting and interpreting standardized psychological assessments. Additionally, two learning processes are outlined: foundational education through universities or graduate programs and post-employment professional development. Future training initiatives should emphasize the latter to prepare assessors for diverse institutional environments and ensure effective support for students with disabilities.

Keywords: assessment, developmental disabilities, Japan, higher education, teacher training

Recent Trends in Supporting Students with Developmental Disabilities in Japanese Institutions of Higher Education

According to statistics from the Japan Student Services Organization (2022), the number of students with disabilities enrolled in Japanese institutions of higher education has been increasing in recent years, with a particularly high percentage related to developmental, mental, and internal disabilities. Assessment is important for such students to confirm the evidence for support provided in their applications and to better understand their characteristics. However, some university faculty and staff members may find it difficult to decide on the content of the requested support and provide reasonable accommodation at universities and other institutions of higher education.

To clarify the relationship between the functional impairment caused by a developmental disability and the content of the application for consideration, it is important to procure an assessment and evidence showing the degree of the disability. However, there are also cases in which there are no easily available resources that can be used to provide academic support, or where those in charge of academic support do not necessarily have any expertise in relation to disabilities. In addition, discussions on how to ensure study opportunities for students with developmental disabilities and how assessment can contribute to this process, taking the curriculum policies of faculties and departments into account, are still in their infancy in Japan. Developmental disabilities are commonly considered to be Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and Specific Learning Disorder (SLD).

A breakdown of the numbers of students with developmental disabilities reveals that

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 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2022; Kondo, Takahashi, & Shirasawa, 2015). In addition, in 2016, the Law for the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was enacted in Japan, and as a result of an amendment to the law in 2021, the provision of reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities becomes a legal obligation from April 2024 and will require the compliance of all higher education institutions, including private universities. For further information on the current status and issues concerning support for students with disabilities in Japan, please see Nakano et al. (2024).

Discussion of the Importance of Assessors in Japanese Higher Education Institutions

The role and position of assessors in other countries appears to be very clear compared with the case in Japan. For example, the determination of Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), which accounts for about half of the students with disabilities in the United Kingdom, is performed by psychologists or specialized faculty members with SpLD assessment qualifications (Ryder & Norwich, 2018). In addition, at higher education institutions in the United States, psycho-educational assessments of developmental disabilities are conducted by, for example, qualified school or clinical psychologists (Eurich, Krause, Cigularov, and Thornton, 2009).

In Japan, Tsukuba University (Nakano et al., 2024) and Osaka University (Suwa et al., 2017) have appointed professional assessors and have established a systematic approach for the academic support of developmentally disabled students based on assessments. As mentioned, the number of students with a diagnosis of or tendency toward developmental

disabilities enrolled in Japanese higher education institutions is increasing, and opportunities to adjust the learning environment based on the study support needs of students with developmental disabilities and their appropriateness are expected to increase. Moreover, assessors, who may be responsible for making such decisions based on their professional knowledge will become indispensable professionals in Japanese institutions of higher education.

We have been examining the skills and competencies needed by professionals who, among other things, are responsible for supporting students with developmental disabilities. The first difference between Japan and other countries in this regard is the difference between specialists and generalists. In Japan, the roles of academic support staff vary widely, depending on the legal background and the economic situation of each institution of higher education, as well as on environmental factors such as the human and material resources available for the academic support system for students with disabilities. Administrative staff may be in charge of interviewing and coaching students with disabilities or may conduct informal assessments of the study environment and other factors necessary for the provision of reasonable accommodation.

In some higher education institutions, it is difficult to conduct formal assessments based on objective indicators, and it is not always clear where and from how to request, for example, that psychological and intelligence tests be conducted, or there are no such resources easily available. Therefore, it was confirmed that it is necessary to establish a reasonable assessment implementation system and a study support system that is compatible with the environment of each institution of higher education. It was also inferred that in Japan, there is a need to develop human resources while taking into account the training and placement of generalists.

In addition, the University of Tsukuba, to which many of the present authors belong, has been accredited since 2018 as an "institution for the systematic training of university staff" as part of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's system of education-related inter-use centers. In partnership with this initiative, several training sessions related to assessors and assessment at the higher education level and symposiums have been conducted. The discussions held at these training sessions gave rise to the following important points as regards assessment in higher education institutions:

- The importance of working as a team to support each student by identifying each student's functional disabilities and needs from a multifaceted and ongoing perspective, and by sharing ideas for the best possible study support in the current study environment.
- The importance of having at least one person with experience as a psychologist on the team, who comprehensively and appropriately utilizes approaches including psychological tests, and maintains ongoing involvement with the intention of promoting self-understanding that matches the target student's situation.

With respect to multidisciplinary cooperation, it is important for experienced psychologists to provide clear explanations of the student's functional disability and social barriers in the study environment, to share information as a team, and to plan support that can be provided in the student's current study environment.

In addition, there have been discussions on the importance of skills and competencies that faculty and staff involved in supporting diverse students should acquire, such as knowledge of developmental disabilities and a positive attitude such as that of a coach who can empower students. Previous studies that informed the discussion were also thought-provoking. The details are provided below.

Harrison et al. (2022) sent cases of fictitious students to 50 universities to investigate the reasonable accommodation review process. They reported that many universities made decisions to provide reasonable accommodation even though there was no clear diagnosis of ADHD or functional impairment supporting the need for extended testing time. As this study suggests, it is important to remember that an unreasonable one-size-fits-all response may not only undermine educational equity for students with disabilities, but also deprive those students of the opportunity to learn and be legitimately evaluated. Again, since the number of students with disabilities, especially developmentally disabled students, is increasing in Japanese institutions of higher education, we believe that we should try to train Japanese assessors to support students with disabilities in Japan.

What skills and competencies are considered necessary for assessors in Japan?

As mentioned, unlike assessors in Europe and the U.S. who work as specialists, assessors in Japan are expected to work as generalists. In addition, although it is desirable for an assessor to be a licensed psychologist working as a specialist who handles evidence and psychological/intelligence testing, considering the reality of dual employment in the field, nurses, public health nurses, social workers, etc. assessors are not the only professionals who are expected to be involved in the support of students with developmental disabilities. They are also involved in the actual support of students with disabilities. In this way, many staff members work together as a team to support individual students with disabilities. Supporters are required to have the skills to conduct assessments using psychological and intelligence tests and to be able to propose appropriate support based on the results of those assessments. (It is assumed that not all supporters need to be proficient in testing.)

Based on the discussions reported in the previous section, we have developed three

major categories of skills and competencies ("understanding students and universities," "cooperation and collaboration with related organizations inside and outside the university," and "assessment of dysfunction") as requirements for a Japanese assessor. The details are as follows.

In relation to understanding students, universities, etc.:

- The ability to identify various difficulties related to study associated with the student's main complaint.
- The ability to deal with necessary and desired information according to the main complaint and findings.
- The ability to understand the context (climate, atmosphere, educational goals, etc.) and social barriers of the university or other institution to which the student belongs.

In relation to coordination and collaboration:

- The ability to understand the situation and roles of support coordinators, medical, health, welfare, and other related parties inside and outside the university.
- The ability to work and collaborate with support coordinators, medical care, health, and welfare personnel, and other related parties inside and outside the university, and share information appropriately and communicate it to non-specialists in an easy-to-understand manner.
- The ability to confirm whether and to what extent information can be shared while taking personal information into consideration.

In relation to the assessment of functional impairment:

- The ability to understand what tests can be used to determine functional impairment (and to refer to specialists as needed).
- The ability to handle and administer standardized psychological and other tests appropriately, and to interpret assessment results in the context of the university and other institutions to derive and suggest necessary support.
- The ability to make cross-diagnostic observations (assessments), taking into account the non-specificity of symptoms and non-cognitive factors (e.g., students' own thoughts and experiences), such as various difficulties (Lagacé-Leblanc et al., 2022) that are not limited to functional disabilities (e.g., the research domain criteria; RDoC) (Pacheco et al., 2022).
- To provide appropriate feedback and encouragement, mediated by assessment tools, with the intention of promoting students' self-understanding and guiding them to appropriate career choices.
- To monitor the support status and student situation and derive support that suits the situation.
- To use assessment results obtained from outside medical institutions as evidence for assessing the student's condition and employ them to formulate and test various hypotheses.
- To be able to incorporate new knowledge (examination and symptom mechanisms) and skills.

In addition, based on the opinions that "there is insufficient time to learn widely and deeply enough solely in training programs for psychologists," "it is necessary to continue and learn further after entering the field," and "there may be things that can only be learned after

entering the field," we assumed that there are two major stages of learning, namely in educational programs at universities or graduate schools, and during employment. In the future, when planning assessor training at an institution of higher education, it may be necessary to consider a program based on the latter stage of learning.

Summary and Future Prospects

To secure professional human resources (\approx assessors) to support students with developmental disabilities, it will be necessary to create and secure opportunities for learning after graduation from the program, as well as to describe the content, learning process, and skills and competencies to be acquired, and design a program with the required content. In Japan, the term "assessor" is still unfamiliar, and its definition has not yet been established. In addition, it bears repeating that staff members involved in the support of students with disabilities are considered to be generalists rather than clerical staff, assessors, etc., and that their job descriptions and the scope of work they can handle are more important than their job titles. They are required to implement psychological tests such as intelligence tests and questionnaires (e.g., autism spectrum quotient (AQ) (Wakabayashi et al., 2004), CAARS Japanese version (Nakamura et al., 2012), AASP Japanese version (Hagiwara et al., 2015), and reading and writing fluency (RaWF) (Takahashi et al., 2022)) Of course skills are important, but in addition, as a coordinated and collaborative team, skills related to obtaining and interpreting materials on which rational considerations are to be based are currently important in support of study at Japanese higher education institutions. For example, it is important to develop and understand the process and routes that must be followed to obtain the evidence for reasonable accommodation by asking where the accommodation is and by whom is it provided, to relate the test results to the student's functional disability and needs, and to develop support plans based on the results, as a team of faculty members involved

with the student with the disability. The team will be able to develop a plan to support the student with disabilities based on the results of the test. In the medium to long term, however, it would be ideal if assessors were recognized as highly specialized and indispensable personnel for supporting students with developmental disabilities in Japan, as they are in Western countries, and if budgets for such professionals were secured and they were positioned within many higher education institutions.

Future practical issues facing Japan are the need to examine programs for training professionals involved in supporting students with developmental disabilities, and to discuss programs that focus on what students learn after graduation from educational programs undertaken after employment. It is also necessary to discuss the three types of skills and competencies required for Japanese assessors in the context of the actual conditions found in Japanese institutions of higher education.

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