

Facts of the University of the Air

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FACTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE AIR

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I. Fundamental Philosophy

University in Japan have been, more or less, closed institutions in the sense that they had practically no sense of obligation for community service, or to work for larger public. Only selected few, usually young high school graduates were admitted through competitive entrance examination. Very often, voices were heard which said, "universities, open your doors!", -but practically nothing has happened. "Equal opportunity" for higher education, about which this workshop has been concerned in past two days, was not materialized. There are many who lost their chance to get higher education because of economic reasons or because of failing in entrance examination. There are people who dropped out. There are elderly people who missed the opportunity to get higher education during the World War II. There are people who want to up-date their knowledge. There are physically handicapped and not admitted to colleges and universities.

The University of the Air was inaugurated to respond to such public demands. Its slogan is "the University for anybody, at anytime, for any learning goals." As of 1987, the University has some 30,000 registered students. The University does not give entrance examination. Applicants are admitted on "the first come, first served" basis. A student can choose courses at his/her own choice, and he/she is free to study or to leave for a year or two. Another slogan is "take your time, you have maximum

of 10 years till you finish your course work."

Though the university is in its initial experimental stage, it is getting good reputation. Except for serious cases, handicapped people are accepted. Even those who did not have high school diploma can be admitted as a "special student", who after completion of 16 units are qualified as regular students. (ref. p. 11) One important another slogan "easy to enter, difficult to graduate" should not be neglected. As mentioned few minutes ago, students are admitted without entrance examination, but term examination is very strict. In average, 50-80% of students fail at term exam. However, they can have another chance. There are the basic philosophies of the University of the Air.

II. Background

The idea of the University of the Air came to the attention to the Ministry of Education, Japanese government as early as 1967 (ref. p.25), inspired by the potential effectiveness of broadcasting for educational purpose. As a matter of fact, the utilization of broadcasting for education began in 1930 for primary school instruction aid through Japan Broadcasting Corporation (now known as NHK), and there was no wonder that the thought of application for higher education attracted not only the Ministry but also educators.

However, it required more than 15 years to come to the realization of such new institution, because many difficulties were anticipated. In the first place, with more than 500

colleges and universities, the question of whether such new institution was really necessary was raised. Extensive survey for the needs was conducted repeatedly, and it was discovered that more than 80% of Japanese public welcome such innovative idea and showed their interest to listen/watch university level instruction transmitted by broadcasting. The potential needs, therefore, was firmly recognized.

The second problem was, then, how to institutionalize the University of the Air. On the one hand, being a broadcasting university with independent station, it required license from the Ministry of Post and telecommunication. At the time of broadcast frequencies came to their saturation point, it was hard to get the license. Two ministries (Education and telecommunication) had to work out jointly to solve this question and finally decided to let the University of the Air have one TV (VHF) and one radio (FM) station licensed. So, the needs, as well as, transmission facilities were secured.

The third question was the nature of the university. The initial idea was to make it as a national university under direct supervision of the Ministry of Education. However, Broadcasting Law clearly stated that no government agency can have broadcasting station. The only solution was to establish a new government subsidized organization called "University of the Air Foundation" which supervise both the university and the station. The University of the Air, therefore, was defined as a semi-public educational institution, but in "the University of the Air Law" which passed the parliament, the university is defined as

"a national institution." In other words, there is a slight legal ambiguity vis-a-vis the nature of the University of the Air.

The problem No.4 was, naturally, the budget. It required huge amount of money to establish the university (ref. p.24). The annual running cost 50 million U.S. dollars and another 300 million U.S. dollars was necessary for the initial cost (land purchase, building, and transmission facilities). Though 85% of the budget was promised to be subsidized by the Ministry of Education, the rest had to come from registration and tuition fee. In order to finance this 15% running budget, the number of student enrollment was set 15,000 each year.

The public looked at this new venture with great interest and expectation. And to a happy surprise of the university, in a matter of three days in December 1985, the number of application exceeded 15,000.

III. Characteristics of Students

The distribution of students as of 1985 shows following characteristics. (ref. p.18)

- 1) Male/Female ratio is 50% vs 50%
- 2) More than 70% of students have their jobs
- 3) They belong to middle class or upper-middle. It was discovered that 65% of students have video-cassett recorders, and in average, a student spend 12,000 Yen (70 U.S. dollars) per month for the purchase of reference books and professional journals.

- 4) Some 30% of the students already have B.A. degree or above. In other words, this group is not too much interested in degree. Their motivation is genuine intellectual curiosity, self-improvement, and above all, the recognition of the importance of continuing education.
- 5) Students, especially regular students, tend to be interdisciplinary because of the nature of the university. They meet with the expectation of the university of which aim is to offer overall general education at the age of extreme specialization. (ref. p.6)
- 6) Certain business firms encourage their employees to take specified course(s) as a part of on-job training.

IV. The Role of Learning Center

One of the major criticism given to the University of the Air from the beginning was that it may lack face-to-face instruction. It is natural reaction since the term "broadcasting" has been used often to characterize the university. However, in reality, students must belong to one of the six "learning centers" where they attend for classroom instruction, use the library, and to take term examination. The centers are open everyday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., except Mondays. Weekends are the busiest days because most of the students are working people. Lectures given at the Center is primarily to complement broadcast programs and textbooks, and lecturers found that the students are extremely enthusiastic. Each center is well staffed with a full time professor as the director, few assistant professors, tens of

part-time lecturers/tutors, and full time clerical officers to respond to students' needs.

As a matter of fact, the learning centers are the most costly part of university administration, because purchase or rent of such permanent space in Tokyo and its vicinity is expensive. Also, in order to provide two-way communication between professors and students, the center and headquarter are connected by facsimile and "fax Q & A" is being experimented. In future, "computer dialogue" and "electronic blackboard" instruction are scheduled. In a word instructional programs and face-to-face classroom are mutually complementary. The University of the Air is not an university floating on the air, but has its solid bases on the earth.