

Interview with a Life-Long Learner in College

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Background

In Japan, the percentage of undergraduate students aged 25 or older is remarkably low, standing at only 2.5% in 2018, in stark contrast to the OECD average of 16%. The concept of "recurrent education" embodies the idea of lifelong learning, aimed at fostering career advancement, social cohesion, and personal growth. In response to the challenges posed by a declining birthrate and an aging population, numerous universities and educational institutions across Japan are expanding their program offerings to encompass not only young students but also individuals from a wider range of generations.

Introduction

I recently had the opportunity to interview Sachiko, an adult student majoring in English at a Junior College in the Kansai region. Amidst a sea of younger classmates, Sachiko stood out as the sole mature student in the class. Throughout the semester, I made an effort to offer her additional support. Our casual conversations revealed her passion for learning, her positive approach to education, and her commitment to personal growth. Sachiko, in her late 50s and a mother of one, epitomized the dedication of a lifelong learner.

Motivation and Family Cooperation

My first question to Sachiko was about her motivation for returning to college. She told me that education has always fascinated her, particularly her passion for learning English. From a young age, she has harbored a dream of becoming a fluent English speaker, aspiring to careers such as airline attendants or hotel concierges. Her immediate goal now is to volunteer as a guide at Osaka Banpaku in the summer of 2025, welcoming visitors from around the world.

Reflecting on her English proficiency prior to college enrollment, Sachiko noted it was quite limited. She recalled her experience in high school, where English classes primarily focused on rote memorization of vocabulary and direct translations, which left her ill-prepared for practical, real-life conversations or interactions. This sense of helplessness when communicating with foreigners served as one of the driving forces behind her decision to pursue higher education to enhance her language capabilities.

Understanding the challenges of juggling academic commitments with family responsibilities, I wondered how Sachiko could manage these demands simultaneously. Sachiko acknowledged the difficulties of balancing attending lectures, completing reports, cooking, and managing household chores. Despite occasional disapproval from her husband regarding too much take-out meals and frozen food, she considered herself fortunate to have a supportive daughter who tended to her needs.

As for work experience, Sachiko revealed that she previously worked as a salesperson in a department store. However, upon deciding to return to college, she made the tough decision to resign from her job. She expressed genuine gratitude for the support and cooperation of her family in her pursuit of educational goals.

Academic Challenges and Social Interactions

I was keen to know more about her college experience thus far and understand the main challenges she faces. Sachiko shared that adjusting to a new environment in her 50s and navigating modern technology has proven to be quite demanding. She found the use of computers, online platforms like Moodle, and the need to submit reports electronically to be quite a significant learning curve.

In regard to her coursework, Sachiko revealed that English listening comprehension, particularly with international lecturers, presented a major obstacle for her. The interactive teaching approach of these lecturers, differing from traditional Japanese classrooms, required active participation and expressing opinions, which she found most intimidating.

I commented that adapting to a more Western style of learning can be challenging, but engaging in discussions with classmates can help foster ideas. Then, I asked her if she has made any new friends at college. Sachiko confided that, at times, she felt out of place, being one of the few adult students at college, making her apprehensive about engaging with younger students. In spite of their respectful demeanor towards her, she was hesitant to seek their help when needed.

Learning Strategies and Future Dreams

While adult education is not yet common in Japan, it is gradually gaining acceptance. Meeting understanding peers and striking up conversations with them could help ease a sense of isolation. Sachiko must have her own strategies to help manage her time and academic responsibilities. Sachiko explained that to manage her time effectively, she has started setting specific study hours early in the morning and creating a detailed schedule for completing assignments and studying for exams. Additionally, she emphasized the importance of seeking help from professors and student tutors, which has been greatly beneficial in enhancing her understanding of course materials.

As our conversation progressed, I found Sachiko's dedication and resilience in navigating the challenges of returning to college later in life to be truly admirable. Next, I asked her about the highlights of her college experience so far and her future aspirations. Sachiko expressed that pursuing her lifelong dream of earning a college degree in English has been incredibly rewarding. Upon obtaining her college degree, she envisioned exploring career opportunities that would allow her to utilize her language skills and cultural understanding, such as in the tourism sector or international business. She also expressed hope of doing some foreign travel.

Given the recent flourishing growth in Japan's tourism and hospitality industries, there should be numerous exciting career prospects. As our interview drew to a close, I extended my best wishes to Sachiko and hoped she found great success in her role as a volunteer guide at the 2025 Osaka Banpaku.

Conclusion

Sachiko's passion for learning and her commitment to personal growth served as an inspiration to many. In the face of obstacles such as adjusting to modern technology and the Western style of learning, she remained resilient and determined. Sachiko's journey exemplified the transformative power of education and the limitless possibilities it presents, reinforcing the importance of lifelong learning and pursuing one's dreams regardless of age.