

The Escalator to Higher Education: Japan's Internal Promotion System in High School-University Articulation

Research Overview

Japan's *naibu shingaku* system enables students at private university-affiliated high schools to enter university directly without sitting competitive entrance examinations. Despite its widespread presence, the system has attracted limited scholarly attention within Japan and internationally. This presentation examines existing research and considers the broader educational implications.

Purpose of Study

Few pathways into higher education are as structurally distinctive—or as little known outside Japan—as *naibu shingaku*, Japan's internal promotion system. Students who enroll in private high schools affiliated with a particular university may, upon graduation, gain automatic admission to that university without sitting the university entrance examinations for which most Japanese students spend years preparing. Yet, despite its institutional entrenchment within Japan, *naibu shingaku* remains almost entirely absent from international academic discourse, and even domestically, surprisingly little research has examined how students actually experience this pathway.

The primary purpose of this presentation is to review existing research on the learning behaviors and academic consciousness of students who have advanced—or intend to advance—to university through *naibu shingaku*. To situate this system within a broader context, we briefly compare it with university admissions systems in East Asia, establishing *naibu shingaku* as a phenomenon unique to Japan. Building on this overview

and research review, we then discuss the potential implications of Japan's *naibu shingaku* system as one model of high school-to-university articulation in societies facing profound demographic and social transformation.

Research Methods

This presentation draws on two complementary bodies of literature. First, we selectively review existing research on university admissions systems in Japan and other East Asian countries to establish the comparative context within which Japan's *naibu shingaku* system can be understood as a structurally distinctive and internationally singular pathway into higher education. Second, and more centrally, we conduct a narrative review of empirical studies examining the learning behaviors, study time, and academic consciousness of students enrolled in affiliated high schools (*fuzoku kōkō*), as well as university students who entered through the internal promotion system.

This review further incorporates findings from the authors' own ongoing research program, initiated in 2019, which has employed both quantitative surveys and qualitative methods, with affiliated high school students and university entrants via *naibu shingaku* as primary participants. By integrating these primary findings with the broader literature, we aim to identify persistent gaps and emerging challenges in research on *naibu shingaku* as a form of university admissions selection and to consider the wider implications of internal promotion as a model of high school-to-university articulation.

Results and Discussion

The *naibu shingaku* system—popularly known as the "escalator" school system (Amano, 1996)—is a structurally singular form of high school-to-university articulation

unique to Japan (Yoshida, 2011). Unlike national university-affiliated high schools, private counterparts operate under the Private School Act of 1949, allowing a single legal entity to administer a continuous educational pathway from kindergarten through university (Kimura, 2022). Most such schools maintain *naibu shingaku* systems leading to their affiliated universities (Murayama, 2020). Although recommendation-based admissions exist across East Asia—in China since the 1980s (Nanbu, 2006), Taiwan since 1994 (Nanbu, 2008), and South Korea since 1998 (Kim et al., 2003)—none of these systems grant university entry on the basis of school enrollment alone. *Naibu shingaku* rates vary considerably, ranging from fully open to highly selective institutions (Murayama, 2020; Sim, Mutoh, et al., 2025). Despite the system's expansion (Tsuchida, 2008), no official MEXT statistics on affiliated high schools currently exist—a notable gap in the research infrastructure (Science Council of Japan, 2023).

Empirical research on internally promoted students remains limited but is accumulating. Nakamura (1997) found that students entering via internal promotion reported less exam-related pressure and were more likely to perceive that they “had it easier” than general admissions entrants. Consistent with this, Sim and Mutoh (2022) demonstrated that affiliated high school students aspiring to all-entry internal promotion tended to study fewer hours across all three years of high school than those preparing for competitive entrance examinations. Building on these findings, Sim et al. (2026) revealed that even some graduates of highly selective affiliated schools experience a sense of academic inferiority (*hikeme*) upon entering university. The study further proposed that two factors may mediate this outcome: the degree to which academic effort and ability are emphasized within the affiliated school, and the relative selectivity of the high school compared to the university entered.

How these students develop academically and professionally over the longer term—during university and beyond—remains poorly understood, and longitudinal research is needed. As societies navigate an uncertain demographic future, *naibu shingaku* merits sustained attention as one model of high school-to-university articulation with potential implications for educational policy well beyond Japan.

Keywords

Naibu shingaku, Escalator school system, High school-to-university articulation, University-Affiliated High Schools, University Admissions