

Delayed University Enrollment and Perceptions of Ability: Interviews with Students Retaking Entrance Examinations in Japan

Research Overview

Unlike in universities in Western countries, where there are the students with a wide range of ages, the vast majority of students in Japan enter university immediately after graduating from high school. This is because the drop-out rates and repeating grades in secondary education are significantly low, and lifelong education is not widely prevalent in Japan. However, in the transition from secondary to higher education, there are students known as “rōnin” who failed to gain admission to their desired university and retake entrance exams the following years, as well as “multi-year rōnin” who repeat this process for several years. Similar phenomena are also observed in other East Asian countries and regions such as South Korea, China, and Taiwan. These countries share the common feature of a clear hierarchy among universities and intense competition for admission; there is a widespread belief that admission to a highly selective university provides advantages in future career opportunities (Dore, 1976; Nambe, 2016), even if students must bear the costs of retaking entrance examinations. In particular, becoming a “multi-year ronin” requires parental understanding and financial support, making it an option available only to those from certain socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, students from higher socioeconomic strata, who are guaranteed the opportunity to retake the exams, gain an advantage, which may lead to inter-class disparities in access to better universities (Tsukada, 1991). Furthermore, in Japan, where there is a strong culture of conformity, delays in educational progression reflected in deviations from the standard timeframe is significant in terms of how it affects one’s perceptions of ability.

Purpose of Study

Therefore, this study examines the process of career choice among students who spent multiple years retaking entrance examinations, based on interview surveys, with a particular focus on their internalized concept of ability.

Method

The study participants are individuals who have spent two or more years retaking entrance exams and who had no work experience prior to entering university. Participants included include those attending preparatory cram schools, those studying independently at home, and those enrolled in a university while preparing to retake the exams. Data collection began in December 2025 and is ongoing. Interviews are conducted either in person or online. Semi-structured interviews were used, and the transcribed content was analyzed.

Results and Discussion

The survey revealed that students who had spent multiple years retaking entrance exams made the decision to continue doing so by weighing whether to accept admission offers from less selective universities against potential disadvantages in their future careers, and that their assessment of their own abilities during this period was ambivalent. Specifically, on the one hand, they recognized that repeating the exams could put them at a disadvantage in their future careers. On the other hand, they chose to retake the exams for multiple years because they could not bring themselves to give up on their desired university. In addition, there was also a positive view that the experience of retaking the exams for multiple years served as proof of their ability to set goals and persevere, and could be framed positively in the job market. On the other hand, when comparing themselves to classmates who had entered the same university straight after their high-school graduation without retaking, the fact that they had taken longer than others to achieve the same goal led to a negative assessment of their own abilities.

In light of these findings, this paper discusses the impact of delayed educational transition on students' confidence in their abilities within the Japanese university environment—where educational stage is strongly age-normative and even a one-year delay is easily visible—while also drawing comparisons with other countries.

Keywords

Entrance examination, Delayed achievement, Conceptions of ability, Rōnin

References

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