

Unlocking Potential through Student Leadership Development: How Japan's All-Women Universities Drive Human Empowerment

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1. Introduction

Japan's aging population and impending demographic cliff have sparked calls to increase women's participation in the workforce and develop a globally engaged digital society. Initiatives such as the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, the Project for Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development, and Basic Act on the Formation of a Digital Society reflect these priorities. Yet, a paradox remains: Japan consistently ranks high globally in women's education and health but remains one of the lowest-ranked countries for gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2022). Moreover, despite domestic trends offering new avenues for internationally oriented student development, Japan's aspiration to cultivate globally competitive human resources is hindered by the phenomenon of "inward-looking youths" (Asada, 2023; Kuroda, Koyama, & Shibata, 2018), who favor domestic education and employment opportunities. Meanwhile, early progress towards a digital society is emerging as universities adapt IT-related curriculum and digital literacy initiatives.

In this context, all-women universities play a critical yet evolving role, representing around 10% of Japan's higher education institutions (Ando, 2017; Mukogawa Women's University, 2023). These institutions face existential questions about their relevance and survival (Shimokawa & Miura, 2023), with some transitioning to co-education or merging with other universities. However, many remain committed to their mission of promoting women's societal participation through education.

This paper investigates how Japanese all-women universities are adapting to these challenges, focusing on their role in empowering students from 2015 to 2025. It explores how these institutions develop leadership skills in their students, aiming to contribute to broader goals of gender equality and increased workforce participation.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

This paper examines how Japanese women's universities conceptualize leadership development in the context of gender equality. Specifically, it asks: How do women's universities

in Japan approach leadership development to empower students and increase women's participation in society and the workforce?

The paper is framed by Japanese feminist theory (Kano, 2018), using gender as both a conceptual category and an analytical lens. Gender is understood as a framework and an organizing principle of society. In the study, feminist theory focuses on how gendered meanings and practices shape identities as well as broader social structures. This lens helps to analyze how women's universities serve as potential instruments of social change, particularly in the realm of human empowerment and gender equity (Rosa & Clavero, 2022).

3. Methodology

The research employs a qualitative design centered on content analysis of publicly available data from over 70 Japanese all-women universities. The analysis is twofold, examining both institutional and departmental levels. First, the study categorizes institutional rhetoric, including mission statements, values, and curricula, to assess their expressed commitment to leadership development and gender equality. Second, it investigates specific academic programs to identify how leadership development is operationalized in various disciplines. Preliminary findings highlight a spectrum of institutional commitment to student leadership and its relationship to gender. These findings will serve as a foundation for future research involving interviews with key informants from select universities to gain deeper insights.

4. Findings

Preliminary results indicate that Japanese all-women universities employ a dual strategy to promote leadership and increase women's societal participation.

First, these institutions are evolving by introducing new departments and majors, aligning with the growing number of women seeking professional qualifications. Programs in business, information studies, architecture, design, nursing, and social welfare reflect this trend, preparing students for a range of careers.

Second, universities are expanding support services that extend beyond the academic setting, with a focus on lifelong career development. Career service centers play a crucial role in empowering students during the job-hunting process, offering guidance that aligns professional aspirations with life plans. Lifelong learning centers further enhance women's participation by offering opportunities to upskill and reskill throughout their careers, providing flexibility as societal and workplace demands evolve.

The above are offered through traditional brick and mortar on-campus offerings and digital education. In particular, digitalization is emerging as a key player by increasing access for

students and alumni alike to university services to support their lifelong learning. Within the curriculum, digital literacy is increasing in prominence as universities seek to equip future women leaders with the knowledge and skills to participate in a digital society.

5. Discussion

The findings underscore the significant role Japanese all-women universities play in addressing the nation's dual challenges of gender inequality and an aging population. By prioritizing leadership development and creating pathways for professional and lifelong learning, these institutions actively respond to societal demands for increased workforce participation among women.

However, the findings also reveal the variability among universities in their commitment to these goals. While some institutions actively align their curricula, career services, and digital initiatives with national objectives, others remain more traditionally oriented, focusing on liberal arts and non-professional education. This divergence raises questions about the scalability of leadership development practices across all-women universities and their collective potential to drive systemic change.

Digitalization emerges as a critical enabler, allowing universities to extend their influence beyond the campus through online lifelong learning programs and enhanced access to career services. This aligns with Japan's broader push toward a globally engaged digital society. However, challenges such as digital divides, resource constraints, and the need for faculty upskilling may limit the effectiveness of these efforts, particularly in smaller or resource-strapped institutions.

The phenomenon of "inward-looking youths" further complicates the equation. While some universities encourage global engagement through study-abroad opportunities and international partnerships, many students remain hesitant to pursue such paths due to cultural, financial, or career-related concerns. This inward orientation risks undermining Japan's efforts to cultivate globally competitive human resources and raises questions about how women's universities can effectively balance local and global priorities in their leadership development strategies.

7. Implications and Future Research

This paper contributes to the broader field of comparative and international education by offering insights into how Japanese higher education addresses gender (in)equality. It provides an international perspective on the role of women's universities in fostering leadership and social empowerment and how they may align with Japan's national policies on gender equality and global engagement.

By analyzing how educational practices at these institutions intersect with national policy goals, this study deepens our understanding of the relationship between higher education and societal development. It highlights the potential of women's universities to contribute to national progress through the empowerment of future women leaders. In doing so, the paper offers valuable perspectives for global discussions on the role of education in achieving gender equality and broader social transformation.

This study opens several avenues for future investigation:

1. Comparative Analyses: Future research could compare leadership development strategies in Japanese all-women universities with those in other countries facing similar gender and demographic challenges, such as South Korea or Germany.
2. Student Perspectives: While this study focuses on institutional practices, further research could explore students' perceptions of leadership development programs, examining their aspirations, barriers, and outcomes.
3. Impact of Digitalization: As digital education gains prominence, future studies could assess the effectiveness of online programs in fostering leadership skills and lifelong learning, particularly for alumni balancing careers and family responsibilities.
4. Long-Term Outcomes: Tracking the long-term impact of these institutions on graduates' career progression, societal engagement, and leadership roles would provide deeper insights into their contributions to gender equality and workforce development.
5. Institutional Transformation: As some women's universities transition to co-education or merge with other institutions, research could examine how these changes affect their mission, identity, and commitment to empowering women.

By addressing these questions, future research can deepen our understanding of the transformative potential of all-women universities and their evolving role in society.

8. Conclusion

Japanese all-women universities occupy a unique and evolving space in higher education, serving as both preservers of tradition and agents of societal transformation. By equipping women with leadership skills, professional qualifications, and digital literacy, these institutions contribute meaningfully to Japan's national objectives of gender equality, workforce participation,

and digitalization.

Yet, the challenges they face—ranging from demographic shifts to the need for greater global engagement—highlight the complexity of their mission. While some institutions have successfully adapted to these pressures, others must innovate further to remain relevant and impactful. The commitment to leadership development, if broadened and standardized, has the potential to make these universities key players in Japan's socio-economic transformation.

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高等教育とSDGs4.7: 多様な社会に貢献するインクルーシブ・リーダーシップ

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要旨

日本の少子高齢化問題と女性の高い教育水準にもかかわらず低いジェンダー平等ランクを背景に、女性の労働力参加とデジタル化を推進する国家的な取り組みが進められている。本稿では、2015年から2025年の間に日本の女子大学（高等教育機関の約10%を占める）がこれらの社会的要請にどのように適応してきたかを検討する。フェミニスト理論を枠組みとし、70以上の大学のデータを対象とした質的内容分析を通じて、（1）キャリア準備とリーダーシップを強化する専門的およびデジタル重視のプログラムの導入、（2）デジタルツールを含む生涯学習およびキャリア支援サービスの拡充という2つの戦略を明らかにした。これらの大学は国家目標に貢献しているが、資源不足、デジタル格差、内向き志向の若者などの課題が残る。本稿は、ジェンダー平等と生涯学習の推進における女子大学の役割を浮き彫りにし、政策、大学運営、将来の研究に向けた方向性を提案する。