

Personality-based Admissions in Elite Colleges:
The Case Study of Medical Colleges in Japan

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Abstract

It is widely known that the Japanese college admission process puts much importance on the fairness and objectivity of admission, but these days more and more universities in Japan have begun to evaluate the applicants' personality in their admission. This research examines the reason as to why some Japanese elite colleges have introduced personality-based admissions despite it is often criticized as being subjective and unfair. Using the data from articles in the academic journal *Igaku Kyoiku* (Medical Education) from 1970s to 1990s, this research conducted a historical analysis to find the factors which enabled medical colleges to introduce this admission process. Two important findings were obtained. First, the professors believe that personality-based admission has an “educational effect,” that assists the students' transition from secondary school to higher education more smoothly. Specifically, the applicants are encouraged to learn the basic attitudes and behaviors that are viewed as necessary for medical training through the experience of personality-based admissions. Second, through personality-based admission, medical colleges demand the applicants to voluntarily learn the competencies which are outside the boundaries of high school education. Two implications are offered from these findings: First, personality-based admission is believed to be useful as an educational device, as well as a selection device; the professors believe that through personality-based admission students obtain the competencies that the professors view cannot be developed through the process of higher education. Second, it is necessary to guarantee students to learn the attitude and behavior in formal schooling before evaluating those skills in college admission.

Keywords: personality-based admission, educational effect, attitudes and behaviors required of medical doctors, medical colleges, Japan

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1. Introduction

In this research, I examine how Japanese elite colleges ⁽¹⁾ have introduced personality-based admissions, focusing on the case of medical colleges in Japan. Some elite colleges in Japan have been introducing personality-based admission in recent years. However, it is widely recognized that elite colleges in Japan select applicants according to academic paper-based examination scores. Thus, little is known about why personality-based admission has become increasingly popular at elite colleges in Japan. This research investigates the reasons why this type of admission was established at Japanese elite colleges. It offers a new point of view to changing admission type, which has been neglected in current research.

In recent years, evaluating personality during examination has become an important issue all over the world. OECD (ed., 2005) suggests a theoretical framework of competencies which contemporary people should acquire. It argues that contemporary people have to learn not only cognitive but also non-

cognitive skills such as “interacting in heterogeneous groups”. Using this framework, OECD is now developing a new examination system which can measure non-cognitive skills.

Evaluation of personality, when used for school admission and employment, is controversial. This is because the result of the evaluation may be deeply influenced the applicants’ educational and occupational achievement. This is why many studies have long criticized personality-based admissions. Bourdieu and Passeron (1991), for instance, suggests that in the interview test held in admissions of Glandes Ecoles, the most elite higher educational institution in France, people from the upper class tend to receive a better score than those from the lower class because people from a higher class have culture in which they can easily learn competencies needed for the test. This means that this type of admissions reconstructs class structure. In the historical study of Karabel (2006), it was found that less minority students were admitted to the top universities in the United States after these

universities introduced personality-based admissions in the 1920s, compared to before its introduction. This is because when personality-based admissions were adopted, the universities got a large amount of discretion to treat majority group members well, such as giving better score to WASP applicants than Jewish students. As these studies suggest, countries in which personality-based admissions have been used for college admission face risks of inequality between the majorities and minorities.

However, little literature exists showing the reason as to why this method of evaluation has been accepted despite of its recognized unfairness. In the U.S. and many European countries it is natural to put as much importance on the evaluation of the interview process in combination with an essay in order to decide the score for college admission. Thus, studies in these countries have not investigated the merit or demerit of personality-based admissions, compared to the admission based on paper examination.

On the contrary, in Japan, people involved in elite college admission have long tried to show the advantage and disadvantage of personality-based

admissions, in comparison to the paper-based examinations. In East Asian countries like Japan, “academic achievement is the most important factor for university admission decisions” (Wang, 2015, p. 3). Admissions based on personality oppose to this tendency. However, now about 34% of students in Japanese most elite colleges experienced interview test, and 24% of them experienced essay writing in their college admissions ⁽²⁾ (Yamamura, 2009 ⁽³⁾). This means that these days personality-based admission is popular in Japanese elite colleges to some extent. It is important to investigate the reason as to why this method has been accepted despite it is often criticized for its unfairness.

The primary goal of this paper is to further investigate the reason as to why some Japanese elite colleges have introduced personality-based admission process. Specifically, this report examines why the combination of paper based and personality-based admissions has been introduced and how it has been established in Japanese medical colleges, which are widely known as the most elite colleges in Japan.

2. Literatures on personality-based admissions in Japan

2-1. The aim of the introduction of personality-based admissions

Some literature reports that personality-based admission is superior to admission based on academic paper examination. The earliest official literature is “Yonroku-toshin” by the Chuo Kyoiku Shingikai [Central Council for Education] (1971). When the report was published, there was fierce competition for university entrance examinations because the number of young adults was large and more young adults came to have the expectation of going to university than ever before. It was said that students had to study so hard that many of them could not afford to earnestly take high school classes, which were viewed as not useful for the academic paper examination. “Yonroku-toshin” criticized the college admission process that considered only the score of academic paper examinations for causing this distortion of high school education. It suggests that the use of high school grades, an essay, and an interview for college admission is the best solution for preventing this distortion, because special preparation does not seem necessary. In other words,

in “Yonroku-toshin” personality-based admissions—such as essays and interviews—is regarded as superior to admission that is based on the score of paper examination. This is because the burden on applicants for the personality-based admissions process is believed to be lighter.

At the same time, several academic studies tried to scientifically prove the “superiority” of personality-based admission method. Nishibori and Matsushita (1963) and Noryoku Kaihatsu Kenkyujo [Educational Test Research Institute] (1968; 1969) showed that the multi-dimensional evaluation using personality evaluation predicted the students’ GPA more correctly than the single score of paper-based examinations. From these results, they concluded that personality-based admission is a scientifically valid way to measure the students’ competencies (Kimura, 2007). Based on this scientific validity, the Japanese government encouraged each individual college to introduce personality-based admission ⁽⁴⁾ (Kimura, 2007). In this respect, these research was the first set of influential studies in Japan that clarified the superiority of personality-based admissions from the viewpoint of their scientific validity as a method of selection.

Rinji Kyoiku Shingikai [Provisional Council on Educational Reform] (1985) argued personality-based admission process have another important merit as a method of selection. It criticizes the academic paper-based examination process for selecting applicants with lacking in individuality, and argues that universities should admit a variety of applicants through the introduction of personality-based admissions. The Central Council for Education (2014) suggested that personality-based admissions enable the selection of applicants with enough individuality and self-direction, which were viewed as important competencies for this globalizing era. These reports indicate that personality-based admission makes it possible for colleges to evaluate students' competencies that are perceived as necessary in higher education and young people's future lives.

2-2. Why are elite universities reluctant to introduce personality-based admissions?

These merits mentioned in the former section have contributed to the spread of personality-based admissions in Japanese colleges. However, some literature suggests that those merits were not

convincing enough for elite colleges to introduce personality-based admissions. This was due to the view that this type of admission is based on the subjective evaluation of applicants.

Reducing subjectivity in the college admission process is essential for the social sorting system in East Asian countries. Marginson (2011) argues that social stratification is made mainly through the result of the examination competition in East Asia; those who are accepted by elite universities will become the upper class of the social stratification, while the others will be lower. Moreover, because of the single-track Japanese schooling system, the essential examination competition is concentrated in college entrance examination (Amano, 1981). According to Marginson (2011), the condition in which the school examination system deeply influences social mobility can exist only when those who failed to enter elite colleges accept the result of college admission examinations. These arguments suggest that the college admission process in Japan should be objective in order to convince all members of a society that the students who pass the examinations of the elite colleges truly are the elite. As Amano (1983) argued, historically it was this necessity for

objectivity that allowed academic paper-based examination to become a major form of examination. This is because the evaluation of an academic paper examination can easily be translated into a score, which enables visible ranking of the result. Only when this ranking arises, people can be convinced that those who rank upper are “superior” to those who rank lower. On the other hand, the result of personality evaluation is often difficult to translate into a precise score. In this respect, personality-based admission is not a fit process for a society such as Japan, where the schooling system is deeply associated with a social stratification.

Moreover, former studies in Japan argued that this subjectivity may result in the loss of fairness in the admission process, which is regarded as the most important value in Japanese admission processes. For instance, Nakamura (1996), Arai (1998), and Kimura (2014) demonstrated that highly competitive colleges have been reluctant to introduce personality-based admissions because they consider the method to be unfair. Yamamura (2010) showed that personality-based admission has spread to mainly less competitive colleges. Nakamura (2012) insisted that personality-based admission is not the

mainstream way of admission even now because it was said that few elite colleges use this type of admission.

2-3. The aim of this research

According to the literature I mentioned above, despite the fact that some people recognized personality-based admission to be a valid method of admission to predict students’ performance at universities, this type of admission has not been recognized by the mainstream college admission process so far. This is because it is regarded as a subjective and unfair method of selection. This means that the validity of personality-based admissions that the literature has shown is not appealing to many colleges in Japan as an appropriate way of admission.

As mentioned before, however, in recent years admissions based on personality have become popular to some extent even at elite colleges, and many of them succeeded in applying this method (Sasaki 2012). This suggests that there are other strong reasons for the introduction of personality-based admission than the aspect of validity which former research has shown. Thus, this study tries to

clarify the reasons through investigation of the logic of the elite colleges and how they have introduced and established this method.

3. Method

3-1. Case

For this research, a case study was conducted. The case chosen was that of Japanese medical colleges. Although competitive colleges in Japan were reluctant to use personality-based admission, medical colleges, the most competitive colleges since the end of the Second World War, have actively introduced and established personality-based admission processes such as interviews and essays since the 1970s. As of 2015, over 97% of medical colleges in Japan conduct personality-based admissions ⁽⁵⁾. This means that the case chosen represents Japanese elite colleges in which personality-based admissions has been established.

Moreover, in journal *Igaku Kyoiku* [Medical Education], those involved in the admission process of medical colleges have often argued on whether they should conduct personality-based admissions or not; the details of which are mentioned later. Therefore, in this case the discussion about this type

of admission is investigated clearly.

3-2. Data

The data for this study were collected from the articles of *Igaku Kyoiku*, edited by the Japan Society for Medical Education. The members of this society are mainly the professors at medical colleges, and its academic journal *Igaku Kyoiku* is the sole journal in which the admission process of medical colleges has been argued. This journal contains not only academic articles, but also miscellaneous articles in which the authors briefly report on the admission process at his or her college and expresses his or her personal opinion. This enables the examination of how personality-based admissions are regarded by the people concerned with the admission process of medical colleges.

3-3. Analytic Plan

A historical approach was chosen for investigating the reason for why medical colleges have actively introduced personality-based admissions. To this end, the data sample consists of articles from 1970 — the year *Igaku Kyoiku* first published—to the 1990s when most of all medical

colleges finished establishing their respective personality-based admissions processes. The articles chosen were those that specifically mentioned admission in the topic. After which, the data collected from these articles containing sentences with words relating to personality-based admissions were all entered into an Excel datasheet and then analyzed.

4. Result

A typical evaluation of personality-based admission is exemplified by the following sentence. Kagawa (1993) insisted, “[The paper-based] examination is not a panacea [for selecting a good applicants]. We impose an applicant on an interview and an essay in order to evaluate whether his or her personality is suitable for a doctor” (p. 73). This statement suggests that colleges should examine each applicant’s personality as well as his or her academic skill, and that with personality-based admissions they can measure the applicants’ attitudes and behaviors of doctors, which cannot be evaluated through paper-based examination. This is one reason for which colleges have actively introduced personality-based admission.

At the same time, however, many authors of the journal expressed concern regarding this type of admission process. Some of them criticized it because the evaluation of personality could not be objective and fair. This criticism is the same as those opinions that were reported on by Nakamura (1996), Arai (1997), and Kimura (2014). Although the colleges thought that they needed a method of evaluating applicants’ personality, they had significant concern about introducing personality-based admissions. In other words, with personality-based admissions they can measure applicants’ other competencies that cannot be evaluated by paper examination, but this is not enough for them to introduce this method of examination. It was another reason that encouraged them to introduce this type of admission: an educational effect on applicants.

In this research, educational effect is defined as an effect of promoting students’ smooth introduction into specific academic and vocational education in higher education. For instance, through the conducting and preparing of personality-based admission, the students’ readiness for higher education can be established, and the professors’ opinion about medical education can be changed.

These are regarded as the educational effect in this research. Nishigori (2012) argued that the college admission process and the preparation process for the admission test could be recognized as opportunities for students to grow up mentally. Nishigori (2012) did not testify as to how the students' growth through the college admission process influences the students' learning in higher education. The concept of educational effect in this research expands his argument and focuses on the influence of the college admission process that allows the smooth introduction of students into higher education.

4-1. Learning a basic attitude and behavior of medical students

The first educational effect which personality-based admissions have is that applicants can obtain the basic attitude and behavior required of doctors through their experience of personality-based admissions. The statements excerpt below is an example of the effects that professors in medical colleges recognized. "I should add that the interview test has an unintentional effect as follows: students become willing to receive medical education after

they express their will to become good doctors in the interview test" (Hori, 1977, p. 298). In the interview session held by the Japanese medical colleges, applicants often should explain the reason why they wish to become a medical doctor and their idea of what they should do to become a good doctor. The statement above suggests that applicants obtain a strong desire to become a medical doctor by answering these questions and after the interview test they become earnest medical students. In short, the professors considered that the interview session plays an essential role in the introduction of medical training.

In addition, the other article cited below indicates that the process of preparation for personality-based admissions has an educational effect. "If... the medical colleges evaluate whether the applicants have "appropriate attitudes and behaviors" required for medical doctors in the admission process..., we [medical college professors] can encourage the applicants to learn such [appropriate] behaviors" (Nakagawa, 1977, p.97). The author of this article expected students to learn the basic attitude and behavior of medical doctors in the process of preparing for the

personality-based test. This suggests that the preparation for personality-based admissions is regarded as an important part of medical training.

This educational effect cannot be obtained through the academic paper examination process. In Japan, college entrance examinations designed according to the Japanese national curriculum for high school students. The main goal of this curriculum is to provide a general education, not specific vocational or academic training (Sasaki, 2012). Medical college applicants cannot learn the attitude and behavior required of medical doctors through preparation for the paper-based examination.

4-2. The personality-based admission as the introduction part of medical education

The educational effect of personality-based admission can be associated with role of the professors within the personality-based admission selection processes ⁽⁶⁾. Medical professors stated that “medical professors by themselves can plan and conduct the admission in order to judge which applicants will make a good doctor” (Deura & Ojima, 1979, p. 164). Through personality-based admission the professors get the sense that they directly

participate in the admission process.

This participatory role of the professors in the admission process is an important process in medical education. Nihon Igaku Kyoiku Gakkai Sembatsu Kento Iinkai [Committee on Student Selection, Japan Society for Medical Education] (1989) argued, “We [medical professors] should associate the admission process with the process of education. We can investigate whether our selection is valid only when encourage the students, who we selected according to our own judgment, to study hard” (p. 131). The statement regarded the medical education as the process of training the students who the professors selected by themselves. The personality-based admission process gives the professors the sense that their selection is connected to the process of education. In other words, The professors believe that the personality-based admission process is the introduction part of medical education.

On the contrary, the professors are unable to directly decide the successful applicants in the paper-based examination process. This can result in the professors’ sense that the selection process does not associated with the educational process. For example, a medical professor argued, “As a professor, I am

concerned that we have selected applicants automatically according to the score of paper-based examination without having any contact with them” (Arai, 1981, p. 77). This argument regarded paper-based examination only as the selection process that decide the successful applicants “automatically”. This argument suggests that through the participation in personality-based admission process the professors came to be aware that the admission process is one of the educational processes.

4-3. Who trains the basic part of the attitudes and behaviors of medical doctors?

What I should note is that these educational effects are regarded as useful by the professors because they think it is important to check the applicants’ basic attitude and behavior as a doctor. However, as mentioned above, these attitudes cannot be obtained through the education process until high school as the goal of the education up until high school is prioritized for general education, not for specific vocational or academic training. In this respect, medical colleges demand their applicants to voluntarily learn the competencies which are outside the boundaries of high school education.

There is one strong argument that supports such a condition: these competencies of students do not expect to be developed after they enter medical colleges. This argument is exemplified by the following comment: Can an emotional aspect of medical students be developed only through the medical education? It is hardly possible to train a student whose character is not suitable for a doctor to be a good doctor through six years of medical college education (Yanagida, 1991, p. 259).

This statement insisted that the term of study at medical colleges is too short and too late to train the students’ attitudes and behaviors of medical doctors. Other professors argued that “humanity, sociality and ethics required of a medical doctor cannot be developed only through the college education. Thus, it is important to select appropriate applicants [for becoming a doctor] before their entrance” (Murakami & Kato, 1993, p. 101). These professors expected the medical college applicants to already learn the basic attitude and behavior such as “humanity, sociality and ethics required of a medical doctor”. Therefore, students who wish to become a doctor should learn before they apply medical colleges.

The arguments above also indicated that the professors recognize that it is importance to train the students' attitudes and behaviors of a medical doctor through medical education. However, the professors believe that their power of influence on developing such an attitude and behavior is limited. Therefore, they intend to evaluate whether the applicants already have the basic part of the attitudes and behaviors of a medical doctor through the personality-based admission process. This may results in laying a burden of voluntary learning of such a basic attitudes and behaviors on medical college applicants.

5. Discussion

The goal of this research was to find the reason as to why some Japanese elite colleges have introduced personality-based admission processes, and focuses on the case of medical colleges in Japan. The most significant finding is that of the educational effect of the personality-based admission process. Specifically, the applicants voluntarily attempt to learn the basic attitudes and behaviors that is expected of a medical doctor in order to be admitted by medical colleges. This

process is believed to be an important part of the medical education process by the professors, because they regarded the personality-based admission process as the one in which they select their future students through direct contact with the applicants. This point suggests that the personality-based admission process plays an essential role in the students' introduction to medical education—which includes learning appropriate behavior and attitude training. Thus, this type of admission has a great possibility to be used as a tool by which students' transition from secondary education to higher education smoothly.

However, there is a concern that the personality-based admission process demands the applicants to voluntarily learn the basic attitudes and behaviors required of a medical doctor. This is because the medical school professors believe that it is important to evaluate such aspects of applicants before the applicants become medical students. Although recently attitudes and behaviors have become increasingly important within the traditional professions such as doctors (Yamauchi, 2014), this research revealed that the medical professors feel their limitations of training such personality

elements of students. Evaluation of whether the applicants have the basic attitudes and behaviors required of a medical doctor means that students are expected to have these skills during their application period; the professors do not teach students this aspects of the process, as they believe it cannot be trained through medical education and must be acquired through the applicants' own efforts.

This has two implications. The first one is for academic research on personality-based admissions. This research revealed that personality-based admission is viewed by the professors in the medical field as an effective educational device through which students improve their competencies. Literature has regarded personality-based admissions only as a screening device, focusing mainly on whether personality-based admission can evaluate the applicants' competencies accurately. Such discussion takes students' competencies as a given, and did not examine the way in which students obtained competencies. On the contrary, the professors who are involved in the college admission process believe that through the personality-based admission process, students obtain the competencies that the professors view as essential to higher

education and cannot be developed through the process of higher education.

The second implication is that it is necessary to discuss at which stage of official schooling system students can be taught such an attitude and behavior. This is important for addressing the policies on the teaching of the attitudes and behaviors required of a specific academic study and specific vocation in the public school system in Japan. The evaluation attitude and behavior in the college admission process means that colleges expect students to obtain such skills before they apply to colleges. However, as mentioned above, the curriculum until secondary school does not prioritize teaching attitudes and behaviors that are necessary for specific academic studies and specific vocations. This results in a condition that the formal schooling system in Japan leaves one part of learning process to students' voluntary efforts. As Rychen and Salganik (ed., 2003) argued, although non-cognitive skills such as the attitude and behavior are becoming more and more important in lives of contemporary young people, young people can obtain few of those skills in formal schooling. It is true that students can improve their competencies through personality-

based admission, but it should be noted that such an improvement is accomplished mainly through the students' own efforts. It is necessary to guarantee students ability to learn the attitude and behavior in formal schooling before evaluating those skills in college admission.

These results and implications were found based on the case study of Japanese medical colleges. Japanese medical colleges are pioneers that actively introduced personality-based admission processes in Japanese elite colleges, but recently this type of admissions is becoming more popular in other non-medical elite colleges. Thus, it is important to investigate the findings in this research so that it can be applied to other elite colleges other than medical colleges.

Notes

(1) In this research the term "elite colleges" is defined as high ranked and highly competitive colleges.

(2) There is no common definition of personality-based admissions, but in this research, both interview test and essay writing are defined as one

sort of personality-based admissions. Interviews and essay writings mainly ask applicants to represent their own opinions to a given topic. Such processes naturally involve the evaluation of personality, although applicants' skills other than personalities-- such as speaking and writing skills-- are also taken into consideration. This is why both processes can be regarded as personality-based admissions.

(3) Circulation by the author.

(4) Kimura (2007) criticized that Nishibori and Matsushita (1963) and Noryoku Kaihatsu Kenkyujo [Educational Test Research Institute] (1968; 1969) contained a severe statistical fault. Thus, whether this theory is scientifically accurate or not is arguable. However, the most important aspect is that many of those who were involved in the college admission process believed the scientific validity of personality-based admission.

(5) In Japan, each college can decide what kind of test it uses for admission. Thus, a few medical colleges have not introduced personality-based admissions.

(6) There is no profession of university admissions in Japan. Thus, professors directly participate in personality-based admissions process.

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