

japantoday

Friday, July 6, 2007

Japan's academics slow to get online

Yone Sugita

Internet usage in Japan is at the lowest level among major industrial nations. Almost 78% of Swedes, about 70% of Americans and 65% of Australians have online access, compared with less than 30% in Japan.

When I returned to Osaka from the United States in 1993, access to the Internet was very limited. There was no Local Area Network in our university. Our university did not give email accounts to faculty members let alone to graduate or undergraduate students. Those scholars who were interested in email communications, like myself, did so through a dial up network. Furthermore, there was no computer in the library for public use and you had to search for books using a card catalogue.



Recently, I have observed a remarkable expansion of computer and Internet access in Japanese higher education. Today, all students have accounts and the library and computer centre provide several dozen computers for students. While there is tremendous progress in this area, Japan still faces a number of constraints.

There are some useful resources in Japanese, but many of them are unduly restrictive. Take Kinokuniya, one of Japan's largest bookstores, and one of the most popular sites for book searches in Japan, for example. You can get only limited search capabilities free of charge, but in order to take full advantage of the search functions, you must become a member. Quite a contrast to Amazon.com! We now have Amazon.co.jp, Amazon.com's Japanese e-store.

Most Japanese universities have already established web sites, but the content is considerably more limited than those in the United States. As an example, let's look at my university's web page: <http://www.osaka-gaidai.ac.jp>. Osaka University of Foreign Studies, a national university located in suburban Osaka, has a web site with basic information about the organisation of the university and its educational programs.

However, it is not possible to locate a directory of the faculty. Even though this university focuses on learning different foreign languages including English, the English version is very primitive. Those who cannot read Japanese simply cannot get much information about the university.

There is still uncertainty about the range of activities for which the Internet can be used. Moreover, the nature of funding and the structure of Japanese universities contribute to these restrictions. While many universities allocate research funding to individual faculty members every year, there is little, if any, funding available for a special project.

Outside funding is also very limited in the absence of either university or private foundation endowments. Without such funding, most faculty members cannot pay for technical assistance to take advantage of

information technology available in the market.

In addition to lack of financial support, the structure of many academic associations and organisations has prevented greater use of information technology by the Japanese academic community. Many academic organisations lack a permanent staff and an independent office. Graduate students and younger faculty members devote their time and energy to maintain their organisations on a volunteer basis. These organisations simply do not have enough human resources to build and maintain comprehensive web sites.

But despite very little financial support, there are now a number of very promising examples of Internet use in the academic world. Younger scholars, especially those who received their academic training in the United States and other parts of the world, clearly recognise the power, necessity, and potential of the Internet and other information technology for their own research and education. Without relying on Japanese institutions, these younger scholars take great advantage of the latest information technology partly by making a direct personal link with foreign research institutions and libraries.

In my own case, I have successfully made close contacts with several public libraries in the United States, and I am in the process of making contact with an Australian university. Many people have long thought of the Internet as the great equaliser, but we now have a growing information divide in the academic community between the haves and have nots, and the situation is getting worse, not better.

Information technology provides equal opportunity, but only to those who have access; Japanese academic institutions must do a better job of increasing public access to the Internet.

May 7, 2001

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