

# A STUDY ABOUT THE INSTRUCTION FOR MASTER'S THESIS AND RESEARCH WORKS FOR "EXPERIENCE REFLECTION" IN GRADUATE SCHOOLS IN JAPAN: INTERVIEWS WITH THE ACADEMIC STAFF<sup>1</sup>

■ KENJI MIWA

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2628-7663>

Seisa University Graduate School, Japan

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, it was analyzed some characters of instruction for master's thesis and research papers for professional mature students in Graduate Schools in Japan. From interviews to 11 academic staff in Graduate schools, where they were teaching and instructing professional mature students, the following investigation results were shown: 1) a flexible approach for program completion; 2) instruction to reflective and biographical research approach (reflection in and on action, relativization of thinking and discussion, a bridge between theories and biographical life story etc.). Women staff and women professional students also proposed issues related to life, and flat discussion must be important especially for the independence of the women.

**Keywords:** Reflection. Professional education. Graduate studies. Research work.

## RESUMEN

### UN ESTUDIO SOBRE LA INSTRUCCIÓN DE TESIS DE MAESTRÍA Y TRABAJOS DE INVESTIGACIÓN PARA LA "REFLEXIÓN DE EXPERIENCIAS" EN ESCUELAS DE POSTGRADO EN JAPÓN: ENTREVISTAS AL PERSONAL ACADÉMICO

En esta tesis se analizaron algunas características de la instrucción para tesis de maestría y trabajos de investigación para estudiantes profesionales maduros en escuelas de postgrado en Japón. A partir de entrevistas a 11 miembros del personal académico en escuelas de postgrado, donde se enseñaba e instruía a estudiantes profesionales maduros, se mostraron los siguientes resultados de la investigación.

<sup>1</sup> This research is the summary of the survey in the first year of the basic research program (C) (General) "Experience Reflection" Graduation thesis, master's thesis instruction model developmental research 2018-2020 (representative-Kenji MIWA)

1) Un enfoque flexible para completar el programa, 2) instrucción para la reflexión y el enfoque de investigación biográfica (reflexión en y sobre la acción, relativización de los pensamientos y la discusión, creación de puentes entre las teorías y la historia de la vida biográfica, etc.). El personal femenino y las estudiantes profesionales también propusieron temas relacionados con la vida, y la discusión plana debe ser importante especialmente para la independencia de las mujeres.

**Palabras clave:** Reflexión. Educación profesional. Escuela de posgrado. Trabajo de investigación.

## RESUMO

### UM ESTUDO SOBRE A INSTRUÇÃO PARA TESE DE MESTRADO E TRABALHOS DE PESQUISA PARA "REFLEXÃO DA EXPERIÊNCIA" EM ESCOLAS DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO NO JAPÃO: ENTREVISTAS COM O CORPO DOCENTE

Neste artigo, foram analisados alguns personagens da instrução para teses de mestrado e trabalhos de pesquisa para estudantes profissionais maduros em Escolas de Pós-Graduação no Japão. Das entrevistas aos 11 docentes das escolas de Pós-Graduação, onde estavam ensinando e instruindo estudantes profissionais maduros, foram apresentados os seguintes resultados da investigação: 1) uma abordagem flexível para a conclusão do programa; 2) instrução para a abordagem de pesquisa reflexiva e biográfico (reflexão em e sobre a ação, relativização dos pensamentos e discussão, ponte entre as teorias e a história de vida biográfica etc.). Mulheres funcionárias e mulheres estudantes profissionais também propõem questões relacionadas à vida, e discussão plana deve ser importante especialmente para a independência da mulher.

**Palavras-chave:** Reflexão. Formação profissional. Pós-Graduação. Trabalho de pesquisa..

## Research Background

According to the Basic School Survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the number of adult graduate student was 57,104 in 2015 which made up 22.9% of all graduate students. The number previously in 2014 was only 17,517. Regarding the enrollment of adult students, graduates schools have special enrollment tests, long term follow-up mechanism, as well as specialized institutes or programs- there were 112 institutes and 175 departments in 2012, which included 67 institutes, 67 departments for law students and 25 institutes, 25 departments for education (“The Current Status of Life-Learning of Adult Students” by MEXT, 2012).

Besides those enrolled for academic researches for their various associations, it’s commonly believed that there are also a huge number of adult students in those master and specialized bachelor programs enrolled for needs to work on their respective thesis aiming at “summarizing their personal working experience in a theoretical way”. On the other hand, thesis instruction from academic staff in universities or graduate school for both in the case of master thesis and reaction paper (thesis on special topics) mainly focuses on summarizing previous studies, setting research questions, verifying thorough studies, and preserving originality of result, i.e. academic achievement with the focus on “research knowledge” or contribution to associations instead of the theoretical summarization of students’ working experience.

Through interviewing adult students and academic staff in master schools with instruction for the demands of theoretical summarization to inculcate “experience knowledge”, “implementation knowledge”, and “hidden knowledge” of the graduate students in various fields, this study aims to develop a the-

sis instruction model for the true demands of adult students in graduate schools.




“The Relevance of Graduate Education and the Career of Adult Graduates from Graduate School” is a pioneer study on this topic. (HONDA, 2003) It shows the major objective for adult students are “theoretical summarization of working experience” for both science and arts students, which made up 62% of the total (2008, p. 72). Regarding thesis instruction and methodology of researches, Masahiro Chikada points out in “Application for Instructing Research Methodology Adult Students in Graduate Schools” “A Study of the Tertiary Education in Nagoya” No 8 (2008, p. 72), that adult students are generally lack of fundamental skills when writing graduate thesis. “Basic theories of Tertiary Education- Research Methods”, a subject to train up the academic thesis-writing skills, is recommended with concrete lectures demonstrated in the study.

In despite of all these, there are only very limited researches revealing the education philosophy of the graduate schools, personal missions of the teaching staff, thesis instruction for fostering exploration, and viewpoints from the specialized work field. In “The Conditions to Nurture Teachers” (IMAZU, 2012), Kojiro Imazu classifies six kinds of potential and ability of general academic staff, but not specifically on university teaching associates. Among the six abilities, we can regard A) Problem-solving & clearance of tasks, B) Instruction to students on certain subjects, and C) panel, school management as practical techniques. Imazu further illustrates that on-job training are very much techniques and skills oriented as they are easy to observe and evaluate. (IMAZU, 2012, p. 69) Ability D “Interpersonal relationship managing ability”, which is becoming important in recent years as a crucial skill set to tackle complaints from guardians, is practical as well. Ability E is “Improvement

of views to lectures, pupils, and education”, and F is “Inquisition of self-growth as a teaching staff” which are both “difficult to evaluate externally” as illustrated in the following table that they are not chosen as topics in the on-job trainings for teachers or in graduate schools for students. As a result, though the practical techniques and skills from A- C could be found in the education and trainings and graduate

schools, and they may be, at all events, linked to practical application, they still remain as superficial understanding and application. This then led to the over emphasis on A- C in the training for teaching staff and their lectures in graduate schools that research topics and actual presentation in the thesis at the front-line are not dealing with their root causes nor practical ways for improvement.

**Table 1** – Potential & Ability for Teachers

Potential & Ability	Content	External observation & evaluation	Generality & individuality of strategies
Ability  Potential	(A) Problem-solving & clearance of tasks,	Easy  Difficult	Individual  General
	(B) Instruction to students on certain subjects		
	(C) Panel, school management as practical techniques		
	(D) Interpersonal relationship managing ability		
	(E) Improvement of views to lectures, pupils, and education		
	(F) Inquisition of self-growth as a teaching staff		

Source: IMAZU, 2012, p. 69

Similarly, the above can be applied on the academic staff in graduate schools who support adult students' thesis-writing. Most probably, academic staff are more capable to instruct superficial techniques from A to C and guide the adult students to complete their master thesis and research paper. Nonetheless, while focusing on the challenges on their work, teaching staff for both theoretical studies and practical researches should also pursue their potential on giving instruction on thesis which are more difficult to evaluate, like views towards the specified work, educational views and inquisition (MIWA, 2018; MIWA, 2019).

## Investigation Flow and Structure

In our study, semi-structural interviews including life history have been conducted to a number of adult students and academic staff who

give instruction to thesis-writing in graduate schools for obtaining the academic information above. The life-history-embedded interviews were conducted from Dec 2018 to Jan 2019 with actual visits to these universities.

We have interviewed 11 academic staff along with a small number of graduate students from 11 different departments. Classification was then done according to the gender and identity of the interviewee (whether they are practitioners).

### Research academic staff

- A) Education promotional organization, a national university (Education Department, Master Program, Male)
- B) Law Department, graduate school, private university (Law Department, research paper, male)

- C) Health Science Department, graduate school, private university  
(Department of Natural Science, master program (distance learning) male)

#### **Practitioners academic staff**

- D) Education Department, graduate school, private university  
(Education Department, master program, male)
- E) Education Department, graduate school, private university  
(Education Department, master program (distance learning), male)
- F) Education Department, graduate school, private university  
(Education Department, master, of the doctoral (second stage) program, male)
- G) International Cooperation Department, private university  
(International Relations Department, master program (distance learning), male)
- H) Social Welfares Department, graduate school, private university  
(Social Welfares Department, specialized program, male)
- I) Business Department, graduate school, private university  
(Business Department, MBA program, male)
- J) Business Department, graduate school, private university  
(Business Department, specialized program, male)

#### **Women academic staff and graduate school adult student**

- K) Life Science Department, graduate school, private university  
(Natural Science Department, master program, female)

## **Investigation result summary**

It was not done in the graduate school to where the author of this paper belong-the graduate school of Education in Seisa University. Instead, it was in other graduate schools with specialized programs for schoolteachers and other educational related staff. Upon analysis with this consideration, key factors for thesis-writing instruction are summarized as the following three points.

## **A flexible approach for program completion**

In our investigation we found that special policies are always stipulated for the enrollment and program completion of adult students in graduate schools, which commonly include special enrollment examinations, afternoon and evening sessions of lectures, nighttime, and weekend lectures. Questions about the program completion were included in the interview, while we witnessed that all our target graduate schools are paying effort to help adult students completing the program. In other words, there are no prominent results concerning this area.

Particularly we could focus on the special consideration about the background and life history of the academic staff as a mean to assist students to complete the program. It is the approach adopted by both research academic staff and practitioner academic staff.

Relatively, there are more practitioners who were able to give instructions about thesis-writing in flexible ways that match with preferences about time and locations of the adult students in graduate school instead of just in those fixed timeslots and places. Interviewee G, the head professor of International Cooperation Department of a graduate school established a flexible supporting system for students by staying responsive to emails and

phone calls. Students in the program also had to travel to Tokyo frequently but instruction was still feasible at all times at any places. In the Business Department of I, instruction is not conducted by single, individual academic staff but a series options about the lectures including online lectures as the flexible support to accommodate needs of the adult students and revolutionary changes in the curriculum initiated by the department head.

When we focus on the research academic staff, we visualize that, generally, their concept is to give instruction about the thesis of their students in an academic environment. For instance, in the education promotional organization of the national university in A, adult students need to cope with the study without any special arrangement- daytime lectures for academic thesis writing; in which they need to fulfill the same strict requirements as other normal graduate school students.

On the other hand, the research teaching staff in B, who is the head of Law Department of the graduate school in a private university doesn't interpret the long-term program completion system merely by the way it's named- adult students who have difficulties in completing their thesis within the designated time can apply for a "long term program completion system", which is a flexible support for adult students in graduate schools. The instructor in C is a professor from the Health Science Department of a graduate school with practical experience as a doctor. The thesis is relatively orthodox, while since the student is in a distant-learning program that the format for master thesis is provided to cope with student's unfamiliarity with academic writing. The research department head of the private university about social welfare also utilize the feature of distant learning that lectures and thesis-writing instruction are not restricted by the curriculum itself but are planned together

with the students in a flexible manner. The life science graduate school professor (female) in the private university in K also communicates with her adult students and re-plan the teaching schedule.

## Questions about life history from practitioner academic staff

Concerning practitioner academic staff, we can consider that they, right before our investigation, has been working hard to assist adult students to choose thesis topics that are closely related and highly responsive to questions in students' work, in which they can hence utilize their accumulated experience. The instruction given for the thesis also aims at applicability in actual workplaces that the whole environment for the research paper and the design of the specialized degree are responding to the demands of adult students. The fact that the concept is neither simply academic nor entirely practical is, all in all, the root for its flexibility.

In I, we have come across the point that instruction was very specialized even for adult students that there are a lot of technical instructions; "interpersonal relationship building ability", "views about lectures, pupils, and education", and "inquisition of self-growth as a teaching staff" are the aspects "difficult to observe and evaluate externally" so they are excluded from the curriculum in specialized programs and graduate schools. In our interview, we have obtained advices from practitioners' questions and approaches that concerning with the academic performance and thesis instruction of adult students in graduate schools, solid life history is, in fact, closely linked to the improvement in interpersonal relationship building and views about lectures, pupils, and education. Together with the result of our investigation, the concept can be summarized in the following four points.



## Establishment of practical reflection and its framework

First, there is an approach from inside out that focuses on the reflection of hidden and practical knowledge of adult students. For example, the subject from the education department of graduate school in D is a former elementary school teacher that his thesis-writing instruction is based on the reflection of knowledge, the education theories, and the “framework” as a teacher.

The objective of practical research for education is like, at all events, Donald Schön’s “research of frame”. We can put that as an academic research, but teachers also have a “frame” to carry on. I think a practical theory for education is to widen those “frames” of students.

The head of the Welfare Department of the university in H upholds the professional, ideal image of social welfare workers that “reflection and evaluation of practices” is set as a subject for students to study after enrollment. (We all go think and reflect our own practical knowledge. That would then become very much personal so it’s crucial to have others evaluate and verify those thoughts and thus why we have to pen them down, but not just say them out.)

The graduate school professor in the Education Department in E also mentioned reflection of practices as there is a sort of “instant knowledge” coming out impulsively in lectures of music. Knowledge of identity, wisdom from life history and “wisdom stemmed from value standard” should be reviewed as the foundation of those impulse. (I do think that music is “interactive”. Experience from performance, jazz performance in live houses become the platform for interaction, they are the enjoyable, impulsive “playful things”)

## The ideal image of specialized professions

Some practitioners have a slightly different approach from the above-illustrated focus on the reflection of practices, though very similar—it focuses on the image of specialized professions and the future prospect instead of the internal side of individuals. Adult students may go to graduate schools for the attainment of degrees (master’s degree or diploma of some specialized profession) or just because they want to do researches to solve problems in their work. Some practitioners present the ideal images of the professionals in the field of that the adult student belong to. Students may have unconsciously missed those images so by such presentation, students are directed to have a deeper look into the root causes of the problems at the frontline.

The business (MBA) professor/ research head from the university I sets “ambition” and skills to be equipped by businesspersons as the important content in a compulsory course, so students reflect and think instead of just study for the sake of attaining “MBA”.

It’s vitally important for businesspersons to think what and how they can contribute back to their community and to the world, that’s why I set “development of leadership, ethical and value standards” as a compulsory subject. The goal of our graduate school is not merely the attainment of MBA.

Similarly, the business professor from graduate school J (an institute offers specialized course) also stresses on the ideal image of business managers in his lectures with discussion based on biography of successful businesspersons. The professor says,

“I don’t want to present students with business knowledge only, but the hard work for their thesis that they will definitely look back at and feel thankful for its contribution in their growth. Our

team has seriously talked about the type of students we would love to nurture, and finally we came to the idea of fostering business managers".

## Relativization of thoughts and discussion

The majority of the practitioners avoids presenting students merely with academic knowledge. On the contrary, they value discussions between teaching staff and adult students, as well as among students. It's true that it does more good than harm to sit adult students in lectures for classroom teaching but down to earth, this is the educational mode that breeds (i) and (ii) above indeed.

For instance, the professor from the Education Department from F stress much on the experience accumulated in EdD (Doctor of Education), which is the second stage of the doctoral degree of the adult students instead of those from workplaces, while those concrete views of education and images about the specialized professions equipped in educational committee and educational centers are gradually relativized through discussions. Nevertheless, students still went through a hard time summarizing the result in their thesis. The professor says,

"[...] when in graduate school I was asked that "Is what being discussed in the central education committee meeting correct? Can they represent everything?" I then realized that the educational committee is just an administrative body, it publishes reports and articles about education but from the point of, and filled with ideas about, administration and management".

Utilizing discussion in lectures is the common point for D, H, I, and J listed previously in (II). With the use of excellent practices, biographies of great people, case studies, and discussion, a collective reflection about actions,

practices is done in lectures, and the ideal images of the experts are constituted. The professor from H says,

"[...] teachers should have their own belief and put them into actions, but those are not the only things to be embedded in skills and knowledge about education. It's to build up your own educational theories. There are so many hidden rules in the education sector, but teachers should verify them by actions. This is promoted by Yoshihiro Saito, a Japanese, teacher." J- "the teachers just introduce a case and through groupwork involving all learners, a collective model that's good to be applied back to participants' work, which is entirely a Japanese style and Japanese methodology. I think such originality is the key."

## The bridging between theories and life history

It was very much impressive that a number of the interviewed practitioners regard their own roles as bridging or translating. Some of them regarding themselves as bridges to bring students in the field of economic studies to the business knowledge (statistical knowledge), and some of them position themselves as "translator". The professor from J says, "to me, practitioners are bridging up science scholars and students at the front line for application. Translation is needed between the two groups. The onus to translate then rests on practitioners.". In other words, practitioners are the ones who link up theories and applications; theories from researches and applications of those adult students in graduate schools. When compared with other teaching staff, practitioners understand more about the importance of their roles and they are more confident in their approach to link up theories, researches with application and actual practices. Moreover, they are more responsive to the demands of adult students in graduate schools.



## The approach from university women teaching staff & adult student

One more finding in the interview this time is the issue about the linkage of life between female university teaching staff and women adult students in graduate schools.

### Issues about life and food

In order to prove the value of their existence in the male-oriented research world, women academic staff in universities have even stronger ambitions towards a researches and thus stricter standards in thesis writing instructions indeed. Nonetheless, the women professor of Life Science in the graduate school in K touches on topics about lives in her lectures and thesis-writing instruction instead of purely, merely going through common topics of natural science. It arouses thoughts for detailed observation and encourages discussions that lead to the constitutions of identity of graduate students indeed.

When focusing on adult students, we witness that through their gather and discussion, female adult students in the same department of life science complete and relativize their own ideas. We can, by all means, say that through the relativization, ideas from female students coherence with those from male students. Even so, when focusing on the quality of the mutual learning, they are mainly related to lives and food that reveals female's point of view towards these issues. The professor from K says,

"I think attainment of a degree is [...] important for adult students. But still, to learn something different about lives and living [...] I mean to have some stimulation about those topics is also great. In life science, lectures are always something like 'the origin of mankind, about fertilized egg, fetus, and something after we

were born.' Of course, I teach all these. In other words, topics like when does the brain form after implantation, when human become human-like, that's from the time humans leave uterus and end their lives. I teach all these."

## Flat discussion and independence of female

Another insight can be elaborated from the relativization of opinions and widening of horizon through the discussion among adult students in graduate schools.

In the case of the female graduate student in the specialized institute for business in J, there is a platform for "flat" discussion and there comes an attention-drawing opinion saying "it's rather difficult for female businesspersons to work equally with men, and cross-gender discussion is difficult. The student from J says,

"In a workplace, all interpersonal relationships are built on the relative positions and titles. It's not just something happening inside an organization but when you go outside and meet other, it's all the same- people just look at your title. However, everything is flat in a graduate school, fresh graduate, managers, and seniors [...] everyone learns equally without conflicts of interest, which give a strong sense of unity.

On top of the concept, ideas always get relativized during discussion, a hierarchical society makes discussion difficult and flat discussion difficult. In this sense, the learning experience in graduate school with special courses help to visualize the importance of women's independence in society.

Considering the above, we can conclude that in Japan, though not all, the objectives of master thesis and research papers in graduate schools should be "summarizing theories for work" and origination from practical issues at front line instead of everything for the sake of study as expected (long desired implicitly) by

A study about the instruction for master's thesis and research works for "experience reflection" in graduate schools in Japan: interviews with the academic staff

adult students. The contents and the method both exist in the field of education. Also, it is clear that academic staff tend to, though include a portion of them only, aim at practical application of theories in textbooks when doing instructions based on their own, and the adult students' life history.

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**Kenji Miwa** Professor Dr. of Education. Graduate Course for Practitioners in Education Seisa University, Yokohama, Japan. Work research: professional development, teacher education, reflective practice, lifelong learning. Email: [k-miwa@gred.seisa.ac.jp](mailto:k-miwa@gred.seisa.ac.jp)

Yokohama Joho Bunka Center 5F, 11 Nihonodori, Naka-ku, Yokohama-shi, Kanagawa 231-0021, Japan.  
Phone: +81-45-212-3830 Telefax: +81-45-212-0721