

Innovation Nippon the 2nd Symposium 2013

Innovation in Education and ICT: Trends Inside and Outside of Japan's education systems

Date: November 28, 2013

Venue: GLOCOM (Center for Global Communications), International University

Overview:

The education sector has been a long-standing challenge in national IT strategy, along with e-government and e-health, as a key area lagging behind in the application of ICT. The symposium looks at two major sets of trends of innovation in education; those taking place within the education system and those outside, and discusses their potentials in enhancing the level of knowledge and the work force towards boosting Japan's economic growth and international competitiveness.

Speakers

- Hirotaka Itoh, Yokohama City Councilor
- Yoshimi Fukuhara, Secretary-General of JMOOC, Specially Appointed Professor at Meiji University
- Masahiro Satoh, Professor at Digital Hollywood University Graduate School, Host of EdTech Japan Pitch Festival
- Moderator
- Tomoaki Watanabe, Executive Research Fellow at Center for Global Communications, Executive Director at CommonSphere

One of the innovations taking place inside the education system is with the JMOOC (The Japan Open Online Education Promotion Council), an organization that was formed in 2013 with the cooperation of Japanese universities and businesses that aims to spread and magnify Japanese MOOCs throughout the country. Yoshimi Fukuhara, Secretary-General of JMOOC, briefed on the history of open education in Japan, stated, "Six Japanese universities started Open Courseware (OCW) a year after the first workshop of OCW organized in 2004. In 2006, the Japan Open Courseware Consortium was established with nine universities. The progress of open education went from text-based course content to the use of rich-media, to the formation of a learner's community that sustained learner motivation, then to the proposal of a degree certification in 2011 to share the skills and achievements, before finally settling into MOOCs such as edX, Coursera and Udacity."

Unlike MOOCs in the U.S. where funding comes from a relatively few venture capitals, JMOOC has a different model. Mr. Fukuhara said he envisioned JMOOC to be a unique, all-across-Japan platform where "common goals can be achieved together by various universities, and sustained by many membership organizations." JMOOC seeks wide participation and promotes cooperation among industry, academia and government partly because these initiatives are businesses disrupting education.

Masahiro Satoh, who hosts the Edtech Japan Pitch Festival where a total of 16 startup companies raised 800 million yen in funds, explained the trend of startups to increasingly provide education through services and applications. "In the last few years, we see innovations in the provision of education including innovations in price. Businesses such as RareJob, an ESL online tutoring firm that uses Skype to cater to Japanese learners, Dotinstall, a service that allows users to learn programming through online videos, and Schoo, which livestreams lectures that target office workers, and other free online prep-schools have all emerged."

Both Satoh and Fukuhara suggested some forms of tax benefits for startups may lead to more innovation and further cooperation among industry, academia and government. However, Yokohama City Councilor Hirotaka Itoh said it takes more than a change in system to drive innovations. He explained why you need to "go guerrilla."

"Education policy is not an appealing agenda to form a constituency in the world of politics. It's not a topic that people vote for. As there are fewer budgets for campaigning for education reform, fewer politicians appeal to the public about education policy. I think people have different things to ask for when it comes to education policy, depending on the region, economic conditions, and how much one is motivated. Therefore it is difficult for a candidate to come up with one perfect idea that would appeal to many voters at the same time. That's why education does not become a key issue in elections even though many citizens care about it."

Itoh shared an example of Oki Dozen High School, a public school on an island 60 kilometers north of Shimane Prefecture, which later became recognized for its unique programs. He emphasized that it is important to accumulate successful practices in cooperation with local people, the board of education, schools and government.

In the Q&A session, concerns were raised about the progress of the application of ICT in education. One member of the audience noted disparities within the community due to different allocations of budget. Another emphasized the need for enhancing the competence of teachers in the facilitation of an ICT environment. Others mentioned hinging factors and conflicts such as security and copyright laws. The discussion was wrapped up with hopes to navigate change in education by accumulating evidence and data through best practices.