

Proceedings of the  
**ASIA-PACIFIC CONFERENCE ON LIBRARY &  
INFORMATION EDUCATION & PRACTICE 2011  
(A-LIEP 2011)**

*Issues, Challenges and Opportunities*

Putrajaya, Malaysia, 22-24 June 2011

URL <http://fim.uitm.edu.my/a-liep2011>

*Organized by*

Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA

Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

*In collaboration with*

Tun Abdul Razak Library, Universiti Teknologi MARA,

Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

*Edited by*

Fuziah Mohd Nadzar

Mohd Sharif Mohd Saad

Szarina Abdullah

Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

2011

## Academic Libraries as Learning Spaces in Japan: Toward the Development of Learning Commons

SAORI DONKAI, donkai@slis.tsukuba.ac.jp

ATSUSHI TOSHIMORI, tosimori@slis.tsukuba.ac.jp

CHIEKO MIZOUE, mizoue@slis.tsukuba.ac.jp

Graduate School of Library, Information and Media Studies, University of Tsukuba

### ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 1990s, new types of learning spaces at academic libraries have emerged mainly in North America. They are called “information commons” or “learning commons.” They provide various kinds of services, facilities, and materials in one location to support students’ learning. The idea of learning commons has been introduced to colleges and universities in Japan as well. The purpose of this study is to examine the present condition of learning spaces in university libraries in Japan. A questionnaire was sent to 755 main or central libraries at colleges and universities. The response rate was 69.4%. The results of the survey are as follows: (a) simple collaborative learning spaces with desk/desks and chairs have become modestly widespread, while advanced spaces with equipment for information and communication technology, such as computers or projectors, are not common; (b) many libraries provide computer clusters; and (c) cafés and/or beverage vending machines in libraries are still few in number. The survey also reveals that learning commons in Japan is in the early stage of development. Various types of learning spaces are recognized as learning commons. They range from a group learning room with Wi-Fi access to an entire learning commons, where several kinds of facilities, services, and information resources to support students’ learning in one location are provided. This diversification may be based on the confusion caused by the rapid introduction of learning commons in Japan. Many learning spaces may rebuild their own services in the near future because of their students’ needs.

**Keywords:** Learning Commons; Learning Spaces; Information Commons; Academic Libraries; Japanese Library Survey

### INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 1990s, new types of learning spaces at academic libraries have emerged mainly in North America. They are called “information commons” or “learning commons.” They provide various kinds of services, facilities, and learning resources to support students’ learning in one location. The idea of learning commons has been introduced to colleges and universities in Japan as well.

#### ***Transformation of learning spaces: from information commons to learning commons***

Beagle pointed out that an information commons, which was initially referred to as a learning commons, originated at Jackson Community College in Jackson, Michigan, during 1987–1988 (Beagle, 2006). He defined an information commons as “a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning” (Beagle, 2006). This means not only a virtual environment but also a physical environment for information technology and technical support was intended to support learning (Beagle, 1999). This appears to be similar to the definition of a learning commons. When the actual commons are observed, it is often difficult to find a difference between an information commons and a learning commons.

Recently, learning commons have been considered as development-type of information commons. For example, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) said that the transformation of information commons to learning commons reflects a new paradigm in undergraduate education, a shift in learning theory from the transmission of knowledge to the creation of knowledge and self-direction in learning at the ACRL 12<sup>th</sup> National Conference in 2005, titled *From Information Commons to Learning Commons: Voices from the Frontline* (ACRL, 2005). Many researchers and librarians agree regarding this shift.

Three factors could be pointed to as a background for creating learning spaces. First, the rapid development of information and communication technologies. Improved information and

communication technologies have caused an increase in digitized and networked information and a diversification of information media. This has led to new types of learning spaces, in which learning resources with every kind of media can be provided effectively.

Second, the growth of the number of "Net Generation college students" could be a factor. Prensky discussed today's students as "digital natives," the first generation to grow up with digital technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age. Prensky said that digital native methodologies for all subjects at all levels should be invited (Prensky, 2001). For example, "Net Generation college students," who are also called digital natives, have a characteristic learning style. They favor intuitive visual communications and learn better through discovery than through being taught. Their style requires high-quality visual technologies and collaborative working spaces.

Third, the emergence of a constructivist education theory could be mentioned as a factor. It brings a demand for learning spaces for group studies and team-based projects. A paradigm shift of college education occurred in North America, from a traditional teaching method, in which lecturers impart knowledge to students, to a new one such as active learning, in which students participate actively in the class to gain knowledge. An example of active learning is cooperative group learning (Johnson et al., 1991).

In Japan, in addition to these factors, there is a crisis in higher education. A national government report, *Images of Colleges and Universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and Reformation Policy in the Future (21seiki no Daigakuzo to Kongo no Kaikaku Hosaku ni tsuite)*, was published by the Council of Colleges and Universities (Daigaku Shingikai) in 1998. It emphasizes the necessity of building the accrediting system and recommends developing learning spaces outside classrooms to improve learning at colleges and universities. Moreover, a change in the students' learning style because of the introduction of an education-with-latitude policy in elementary and secondary schools, and a diversification in the academic performances of college students should be noted. The latter is based on a change in the university entrance examination system and the universalization of higher education in Japan.

The purpose of this study is to examine the current condition of learning spaces in college and university libraries in Japan. For instance, Ochanomizu University Library published several articles about the aspects and concept of its learning commons, and the Tokyo Woman's Christian University Library started a new program titled "My life, My library," which was a learning and a user-focused library space. However, most of them only paid attention to their own cases. At present, there is neither a nationwide survey on learning commons nor a holistic approach to the Japanese way of learning commons. To develop learning commons further, it is important to understand and analyze the present situation of learning spaces at university libraries in Japan.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The authors conducted a nationwide survey of learning spaces at university libraries to learn the following aspects: (a) the facilities, materials, and services for learning support that they currently provide; (b) the existing condition for a learning commons; and (c) the facilities, materials, and services for learning support that they consider to be necessary.

At the end of July in 2010, a questionnaire was sent to the directors of 755 main or central libraries at colleges and universities (86 national university libraries, 77 public university libraries, 592 private university libraries). Seven hundred and forty-seven libraries listed in *Statistics on Libraries in Japan 2009 (Nihon no Toshokan: Tokei to Meibo 2009)* were added to some libraries listed in *A List of Universities in Japan 2009 (Zenkoku Daigaku Ichiran 2009)*.

The reply deadline was August 31, and reminders were sent in the fall of 2010. Five hundred and twenty-four libraries responded (75 national university libraries, 65 public university libraries, and 384 private university libraries) at a response rate of 69.4%. In addition to the survey, the authors also interviewed librarians and academic staff members involved with the learning commons in some university libraries in 2010.

**Table 1: Number of Colleges/Universities and Responses according to their types**

Types of Colleges/Universities	Number of Colleges/Universities	Number of Responses	%
Total	755	524	69.4
National	86	75	87.2
Public	77	65	84.4
Private	592	384	64.9

## FINDINGS

### *Facilities, materials, and services for learning support*

Supporting learning plays an important role for today's university library; many university libraries provide the resources to support students' learning. Over 80% of them provide "student-requested books" (95.9%, 494 libraries), "faculty-recommended books" (89.9%, 463 libraries), and "books in the syllabi" (81.6%, 420 libraries), whereas only 5.5% of them (28 libraries) provide "Hand-outs from classes."

**Table 2: Equipment for Learning Support**

Equipment	Number of libraries	%
Computer networks	404	78.4
Open space with computer clusters	347	67.4
Collaborative learning space with desk/desks and chairs	301	58.4
Chatting space (not including collaborative learning space)	162	31.5
Collaborative learning space with ICT equipment	131	25.4
Silent space	101	19.6
Room/rooms with computer clusters	99	19.2
Software used in classes/assignments	94	18.3
Food/drink space (not including cafés)	77	15.0
Space with café and/or a beverage vending machine	76	14.8
Free space with movable desk/desks and chairs	61	11.8
Space with multimedia production software suites/equipment	31	6.0
Others	64	12.4

(N = 515)

Next, how many libraries provide equipment and services for learning support? Table 2 shows that many libraries provide computer networks and computer clusters. Although approximately 80% of libraries provide computer networks, 347 libraries (67.4%) have an open space with the computer clusters, and 99 libraries (19.2%) have room/rooms with computer clusters.

Although simple collaborative learning spaces with desk/desks and chairs have become modestly widespread, advanced spaces with equipment for information and communication technology, such as computers and projectors, are not common. Three hundred and one libraries (58.4%) have simple collaborative learning spaces, and 131 libraries (25.4%) have advanced ones. The cafés and/or beverage vending machines in libraries are still few in number. Only 76 libraries (14.8%) have a café and/or a beverage vending machine.

Regarding learning support services, as shown in Table 3, more than 90% of libraries provide library orientations, and approximately 80% provide information literacy courses (how to find articles). Interlibrary loan service via the Web or e-mail and reservation services via the Web or e-mail are provided by more than half of them. However, there are few libraries that provide other services, such as career support services (13.2%), academic writing support

services (10.1%), learning support for handicapped students (5.8%), and academic guidance support services (2.9%).

**Table 3: Services for Learning Support**

Services	Number of libraries	%
Library orientation	487	94.6
Information literacy courses (how to find articles)	404	78.4
Interlibrary loan service via the Web or e-mail	315	61.2
Reservation service via the Web or e-mail	281	54.6
Reference service via the Web or e-mail	146	28.3
Instruction on finding articles on the Web	130	25.2
Information technology and technical support services	122	23.7
Information literacy courses (not including how to find articles)	75	14.6
Career support services	68	13.2
Academic writing support services	52	10.1
Learning support for handicapped students	30	5.8
Academic guidance support services	15	2.9
Supplementary instruction services	6	1.2
Learning support for students with developmental disorders	1	0.2
Others	33	6.4

(N = 515)

Table 4 shows that collaboration between libraries and other departments (except with members of the teaching staff) is not widespread in the Japanese universities.

**Table 4: Collaboration on Learning Support**

Collaborators	Number of libraries	%
Members of the teaching staff	340	66.0
Information and communications technology department	194	37.7
Academic affairs department	180	35.0
Career support department	81	15.7
Supplementary instruction department	9	1.9
Writing support department	6	1.2
No collaboration with other departments	75	14.6
Others	29	5.6

(N = 515)

### ***Installed conditions for learning commons***

The survey also reveals that learning commons in Japan are in the early stage of development. In this survey, learning commons is defined as spaces to provide comprehensive services, resources, and equipment for student self-learning in one location.

Based on this definition, 78 libraries (15.2%) said that they run a learning commons. When did they establish a learning commons? Figure 1 shows that the most frequent year was 2009 (25.6%, 20 libraries), followed by 2010 (17.9%, 14 libraries), and 2007 (12.8%, 10 libraries). Over 60% of the learning commons in Japan were established in the latter half of the first decade of this century. This means that learning commons have been rapidly expanding. They are named, for instance, the Learning Zone, the Student Commons, the Communication Lab, the Group Learning Room, and the Media Commons, except for the "Learning Commons."

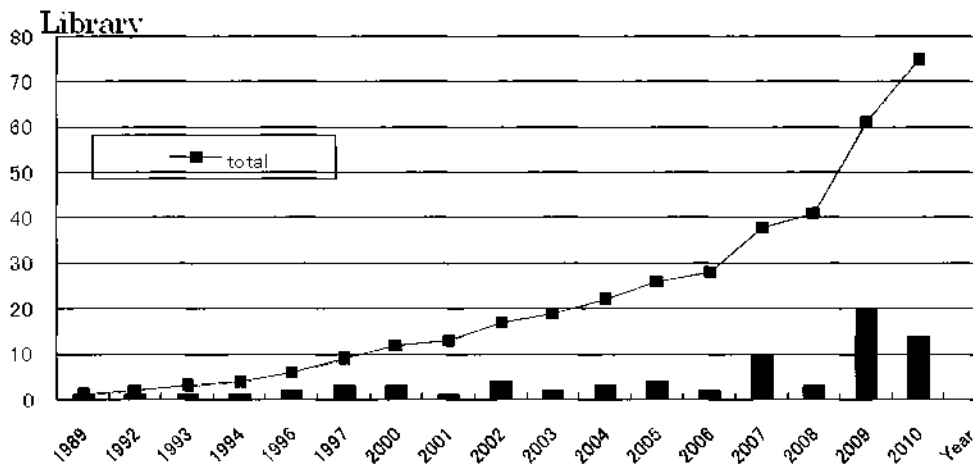


Figure 1: Established Year of Learning Commons

The reasons for establishing learning commons are shown in Figure 2. The reasons are multiple; -construction and/or renovation" was cited by 51.4% (37 libraries). Specified reasons of "Others" are, for example, -restructuring of reading spaces" (5 libraries), -getting the grants." (4 libraries ), -requests by faculty members" (3 libraries), and so on.

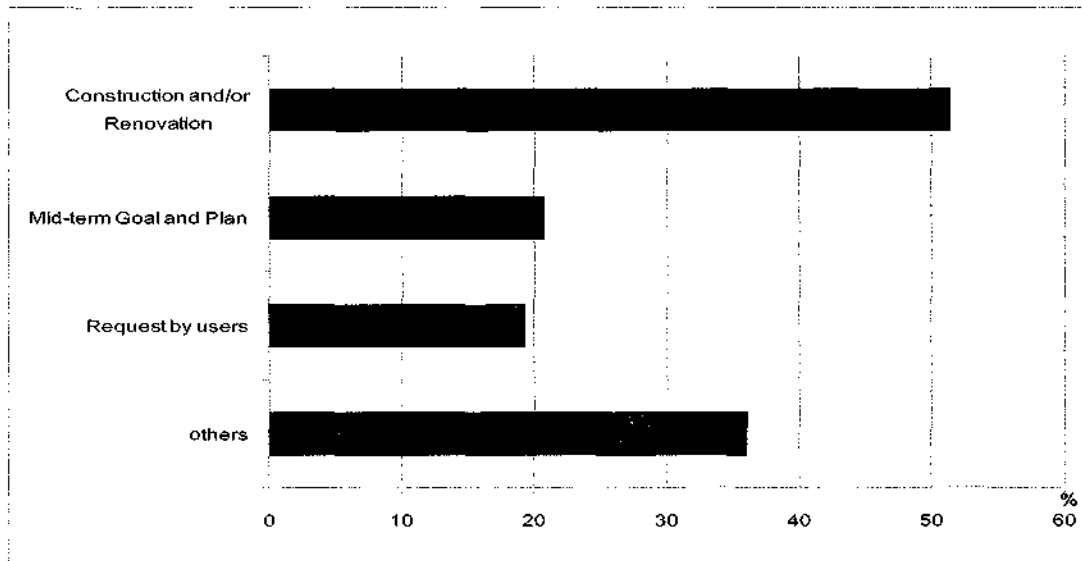


Figure 2: Reasons for Establishing Learning Commons (N = 78)

What services or activities for learning support are provided at learning commons in Japan?

**Table 5: Activities in Learning Commons**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Number of libraries</b>	<b>%</b>
Chatting space	49	62.8
Providing student-centered services	42	53.8
Help desk	26	33.3
Providing one-stop service for learning support	21	26.9
Collaboration with other departments to manage learning support services	20	25.6
Managing learning support space collaboratively with classes	19	24.4
Understanding student learning support needs	18	23.1
Survey on using learning support space	17	21.8
Providing student staff	16	20.5
Food/drink space	15	19.2
Codification of the goals/missions of the learning support space	7	9.0
Providing support service for the lecturer's teaching materials	4	5.1

(N = 78)

Table 5 shows that “chatting space” and “providing student-centered services” are common activities at learning support spaces in Japan. On the other hand, various types of learning spaces are recognized. They range from a group learning room with Wi-Fi access to an entire learning commons, where several kinds of facilities, services, and information resources are provided in one location to support students' learning.

This diversification may be based on the confusion caused by the rapid introduction of learning commons in Japan. This point may be related to the reason very few libraries (8.3%) have codified the goals/missions of learning support spaces.

Many learning spaces may rebuild their own services in the near future because of their students' needs.

#### ***Facilities, materials, and services for learning support***

Finally, all university libraries were asked to evaluate the necessity of the 18 elements of a learning commons. Each element is answered in a four-point rating scale.

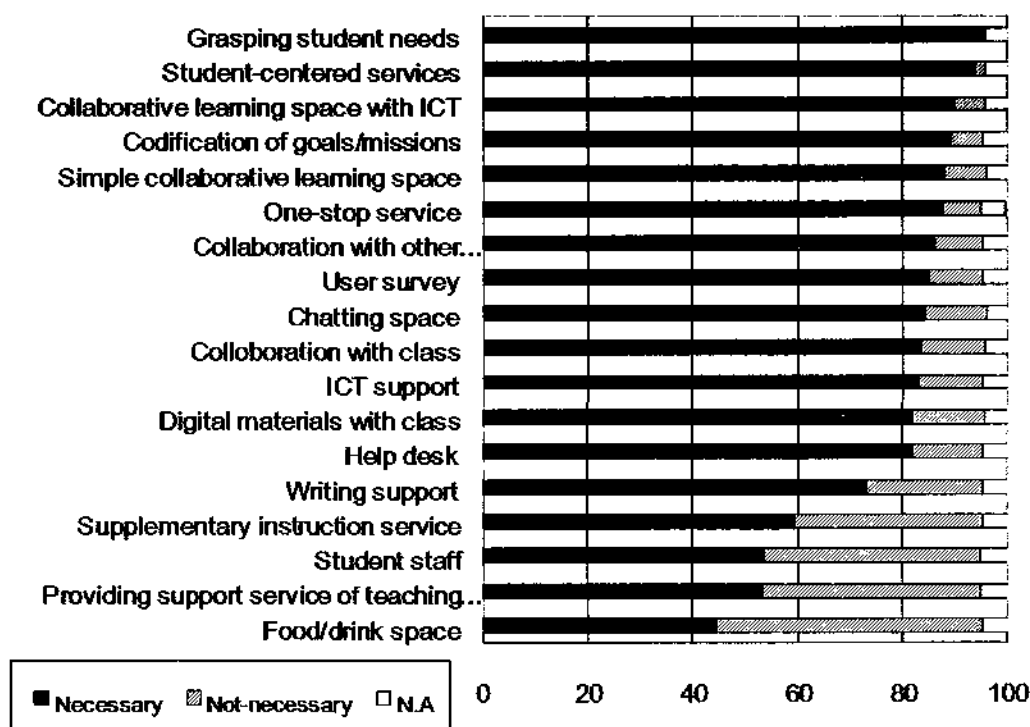


Figure 3: Necessary elements of Learning Commons

Except for “food/drink in a learning commons,” all elements are more “necessary” than “not necessary.” The top five necessary elements are as follows: “grasping students’ needs for learning support,” “providing student-centered services,” “collaborative learning space with ICT equipment,” “codification of goals/missions of the learning support space,” and “collaborative learning space with desk and chair.” (In Figure 3, the numbers for “strongly necessary” and “necessary” are combined, as is the number of “not necessary” and “slightly necessary.”)

Most of the elements considered necessary by more than 80% of university libraries are based on the original activities of the library. Thus, it can be said that a learning commons is considered an original activity in a university library.

## CONCLUSION

It can be said that the results of the survey examined the current conditions of the learning spaces at university libraries in Japan, and they have served as a useful basis for constructing learning-focused library spaces, not only in Japan but also in other countries.

Since the latter half of 1980s, a paradigm shift of college education has occurred in North America, from a traditional teaching method, in which lecturers impart knowledge to students, to a new one such as active learning, in which students participate actively in the class to gain knowledge. An example of active learning is cooperative group learning. And this new learning style for “Mill Generation college students” has led to the development of learning commons.

This new trend arrived in Japan in the early 2000s, and many learning commons have been established in Japan based on a model of new teaching method followed North America. However, this survey revealed that most services provided in learning commons in Japan are the same as traditional services in academic libraries. There are few innovative services for students’ learning support. This point is also shown in the results of the survey on necessary elements for a learning commons. With this as the background, we wonder if there is a need for



innovative services because teaching methods in Japanese higher education have not experienced a paradigm shift like that observed in North America. Or a part of facilities may be overemphasized since many learning commons were established because of construction and renovation. We also wonder if there would be some institutional problems in academic libraries, where a small extent of collaboration with other departments is observed.

To develop learning commons further, we should codify the goals and missions of learning support spaces associated with the college/university mission without delay. In addition, we should conduct user surveys about learning environment. It is an important task for us to develop learning support spaces at colleges and universities, because the learning outcomes are required all over the world.

In the near future, we would like to present a Japanese model for learning spaces design at college and university libraries. For that purpose, we will study a learning support space at a two-year postsecondary institution in Japan to understand the conditions of learning spaces.

## REFERENCES

- Association of College and Research Libraries (2005). From Information Commons to Learning Commons: voices From the Frontline. <<http://library.uncc.edu/infocommons/conference/minneapolis2005/>> [accessed: 2010-12-12]
- Beagle, D. (1999). Conceptualizing an information commons. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 25(2), 82-89.
- Beagle, D. (2006). *The information commons handbook*. New York: Neal-Shuman Publishers, Inc..
- Bunkyo Kyokai (2009). *A List of Universities in Japan; 2009 (Zenkoku Daigaku Ichiran; 2009)*. Tokyo:Bunkyo Kyokai. 930p..
- Japan Library Association (2010). *Statistics on Libraries in Japan; 2009 (Nihon no Toshokan: Tokei to Meibo; 2009)*. Tokyo: Japan Library Association. 289p.
- Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T. & Smith, K.A. *Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom*, Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co., 1991.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrant. *On the Horizon*, 9(5). <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf> [accessed: 2010-12-14]