

Back to School—a Few Decades Later

How Tokyo Metropolitan University's unique program is giving older citizens new ways to connect with ideas and people.

by **Phoebe Amoroso**

If lectures at an open university—where anyone can study anything—are like an à la carte menu, then consider Premium College at Tokyo Metropolitan University to be more like a French full course meal. This is a menu for select diners. Aimed solely at those aged 50 or over, students pursue a unique interdisciplinary curriculum centered around one grand, overarching theme: Tokyo.

The program comprises a one-year course of on-campus classes and off-site fieldwork—although operations have currently moved online due to COVID-19. Unlike other universities, there are no specific academic entrance requirements for aspirants fitting the age demographic, besides having graduated from high school. Eager applicants must write a short essay and undertake an interview where they must demonstrate their passion in order to secure one of the limited 50 places on offer each year.

Launched in April 2019, Premium College reflects a broader effort by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) to welcome in the era of the so-called “100-year life.” The TMG has launched several initiatives aimed at senior citizens, from promoting sports and cultural activities to establishing the Tokyo Metropolitan Employment Service Center, where elder residents can receive consultations on everything from skill development to short- or part-time work opportunities.

Many of those studying at Premium College are driven by a motivation to proactively contribute to society. “People in their sixties can still be healthy for another 30 years,” says one student (63), who was among the first intake. “From that standpoint, I am thinking about what I can do next, whether that is further studying or volunteer activities. There are many directions I could take.”

Kachi Naoki, Professor of Ecology, teaches courses on nature, including Tokyo's islands and the forested western region. “The students have really different personalities from undergraduates,” he says. “Because only those 50 years old or older can apply, they have a wealth of life experience. Moreover, they really want to once again play an

active part... and they have a clear awareness of problems.”

Students can learn about the city in which they live through a choice of 40 different subjects. “There are so many fields that I just didn't know about until now,” said one student (67), who retired from his job early in order to begin studying again. “For example, things like concrete and structures, and how Japanese buildings are constructed. And, also social welfare and child psychology. It really satisfies curious minds.”

More than that, the opportunities for fieldwork are one of the core strengths of the program. Students visit various sites around Tokyo, from the central Ueno Zoo to Tachikawa Life Safety Learning Center in the Tama area. “Better than just reading books, doesn't seeing the actual thing lead to a greater understanding?” asks a student (68), who has enjoyed trips to many Tokyo facilities, including some not usually accessible to the general public.

The heavy emphasis on fieldwork serves a wider goal to give back to society. “We are really hoping that the students will be able to use the many resources in Tokyo to contribute to community development after they graduate,” says Prof. Kachi.

While operations currently remain online for safety, under usual circumstances students have plenty of opportunities to bounce ideas at weekly classes on campus. They can even sit in on undergraduate courses, allowing them to interact with younger students. Debate, discussion, and casual chats with classmates are widely cited by students as one of their favorite parts of the program. Some like to joke that they attend an optional “sixth period” on the timetable—after-class socializing at a nearby pub.

There is, of course, the important question of future plans. Premium College has proved so popular that, from April 2021, students will be able to continue studying for up to four years, giving them plenty of time to consider how to apply their newly acquired knowledge of Tokyo and make full use of its resources.

“We are only in the second year of the program,” says Prof. Kachi. “I am looking forward to seeing where the students end up next.”