



Youth Venture Three-Year Acceleration Project [YVAP]

Incubating 100 Young Changemakers in Japan

July 2020~June 2023

Ashoka Japan's Youth Venture program started in the summer of 2012. During the past eight years, we have selected 102 young changemaker teams from more than 400 applicants between the ages of 12 and 20.

Selection panels choose from young presenters who have not only come up with an idea to make a positive change in society, but have already taken action based on their idea. Panelists explore whether an applicant's motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic, and whether s/he is resilient enough to transform her/his initial motivation into sustainable action that will enable her/him to make a difference. Ashoka Japan mainly focuses on where the applicant's motivation comes from rather than how fully formed the applicant's project is.

Youth Venturers are not asked to complete their activities within the year that they are selected to be a part of the Youth Venture program. Rather, they are encouraged to test their ideas without being afraid of making mistakes or failure. The Youth Venture program is a one-year period in which budding changemakers can experiment with their ideas for improving their communities.

This experience, we believe, will enable them to recognize that there is a choice between a "value driven path" or an "intrinsically generated direction" and extrinsically generated directions that determine success based on income, social status, or the name of organizations to which they belong.

BACKGROUND

After Japan's defeat in WWII, the Japanese government's goals for economic development lead to unprecedented prosperity in less than 40 years. However, this was at the expense of the personal happiness and wellbeing of the people who made the success possible.

What followed—Japan's "Lost Decade" in the 1990's—was a loss of confidence, competence, and resilience among the Japanese people. What's worrisome is that many surveys show that Japanese youth are dramatically failing in non-cognitive skills. We define non-cognitive skills as empathy for those who have different values and perspectives, critical and creative thinking, resilience and tenacity to achieve goals, intellectual curiosity, and imagination.

In a 2019 Nippon Foundation survey that asked 17~19 year old students in nine countries "I think I have a potential power to make a difference in society," Japanese students ranked the lowest with only 18.3% of students agreeing to the statement. In comparison, 83.4% of students in India agreed to the statement, 65.7% in the U.S., 65.6% in China, 50.6% in the U.K., 45.9% in Germany, and 39.6% in South Korea.¹

In 2017, 45% of high school students surveyed said that they "think they are worthy human-beings," while the average was 80-83% in other countries, a reflection of the lack of self-esteem among

¹ Nippon Foundation, <https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en/news/articles/2019/20191225-39458.html>

Japanese youth². Social withdrawal, or *hikikomori*, and refusal to go to school, *futoko*, among Japan's youth, in addition to mental disorders and high suicide rates in every generation are clear warning signs that change is needed as soon as possible. In October 2018, the number of first through twelfth grade students suffering from *futoko* reached an all-time high: 164,528 students were absent for 30+ days, an increase of more than 20,000 students (144,031) from 2017.³ These students are feeding into the half a million men between ages of 18 and 35 who are *hikikomori*. These individuals refuse to leave their bedrooms, isolating themselves within a single room for periods that exceed six months (Japanese Ministry of Health).

In a 2015 survey by the Japan National Institution for Youth Education, 72.5% of 13~18 year olds in Japan said "There are times I feel I am worthless." Japanese students overwhelmingly agreed to this statement compared to those from other countries. In the same survey, only 31.9% agreed that they wanted to engage in work that contributes to society, the lowest percentage compared to those in other countries. Moreover, in the latest 2020 report from UNICEF on children's 'mental-wellbeing', 'physical health' and 'skills' among the top wealthy 38 countries, Japan is ranked 37th in 'mental-wellbeing' while ranked at 1st in physical health and 27th in 'skills'.⁴

Despite this, Japan still maintains relatively high scores in the three main academic areas: 5th in science, 6th in mathematics and 14th in reading comprehension.⁵ Japanese policy-makers still believe cognitive skills are the only indices to measure "excellence" and do not realize non-cognitive skills, such as empathy, resilience, and critical and creative thinking, are essential to success in the era that is unfolding in front of us. In addition, to our dismay, the Japanese educational system still focuses on nurturing individuals who can prosper within strict frameworks set by a traditional hierarchical structure and a seniority system. Thinking critically and creatively, i.e. thinking outside the box is not encouraged because it is not valued. The Japanese educational system trains students to obey the rules, although many of the rules are not justified. For example, some high schools mandate female students must wear white underwear and others mandate students who have naturally brown hair must dye their hair black.

This attitude among policy-makers explains the lack of investment in education. In 2014, the nation's expenditure on education stood at 3.2 percent of gross national product against the OECD average of 4.4 percent. Japan ranked 35th out of 37 among OECD member countries in public spending on education in 2014.⁶

Given these circumstances, Ashoka Japan is convinced it needs to vigorously fortify and speed up the Youth Venture program to nurture non-cognitive skills in Japan's youth to enable them to meet the challenges facing communities in Japan and beyond. This is the purpose of the Youth Venture Acceleration Project.

² National Institution For Youth Education. http://www.niye.go.jp/kenkyu_houkoku/contents/detail/i/98/

³ BBC. "Why so many Japanese children refuse to go to school" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50693777>

⁴ UNICEF, Worlds of Influence. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/child-well-being-report-card-16>

⁵ PISA 2018 Results, OECD. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-results-volume-i_5f07c754-en

⁶ The Japan Times, "Japan ranked last among 34 nations for public spending on education in 2014: OECD" <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/09/13/national/japan-ranked-last-among-34-nations-public-spending-education-2014-oecd/>

GOALS

1. Nurture next generation leaders with a new set of non-cognitive skills, including empathy, imagination, resilience, creativity, and the courage to take risks.

The Youth Venture program in Japan is slowly but steadily influencing the standards of excellence for young individuals. There is a growing awareness among educators in traditional top higher education institutions that excelling in academic areas only is not enough. In 2018, a Youth Venturer was accepted by the University of Tokyo, considered the highest academic institution in Japan, through a new acceptance process mainly focusing on in-person interviews. Another student was accepted by Stanford University in the U.S. Youth Venturers are also just beginning to be favored candidates by employers who are looking for creative and critical thinkers.

Ashoka Global (Ashoka Japan's parent organization) has a network of 45 universities that share the cutting-edge vision that changemaking skills are essential for future leaders. In these universities, referred to as "Ashoka U Changemaker Campuses," leaders believe the ultimate goal of higher education is to nurture young people who value making the world a better place. A survey of 2,500 students and 100+ faculty, conducted by Mission Measurement, in five Ashoka Changemaker Campuses shows 88% of students intend to dedicate their future careers to creating positive social impact, 69% agree their university experience has prepared them well for their future career and 84% self-identify as changemakers.

Unfortunately, there is no Japanese university or college in the network, as Japanese university administrators do not yet grasp the significance of non-cognitive skills that are instrumental to success. The mission of Youth Venture is to plant the seed for this understanding and to proselytize the new standards of elites in Japan.

2. Change the mindset of adults in Japan who adhere to long held societal structures that favor seniority and hierarchy, and top test scores in science, math, and reading.

As challenging as it is to find Youth Venturers, identifying panelists presents its own set of hurdles. Most Japanese adults are used to programs that rely on adults as teachers, mentors or advisors, and they see their role as giving advice and guidance. This is a standard method for empowering youth, minorities and women. Ashoka Japan Youth Venture is different. We do not allow adults to get involved in this way.

We ask panelists to use their involvement in the Youth Venture program to first reflect on themselves. Most come to realize that they have a bias towards young people, and believe them to be less insightful, less intuitive, and less knowledgeable about issues. We train panelists to ask questions that help the young presenters explore who they are and to uncover whether they are honest with themselves. We want panelists to find out whether the presenter is resilient enough to pursue their dreams, especially after the one-year Youth Venture program is completed. We challenge the panelists to figure out how to determine if the presenters understand who they are, where their motivation comes from, whether they are resilient, and whether they have the grit that it takes to pursue their projects—to fail and begin again, to change course if needed, and to hold their ground when they know they are doing the right thing.

OBJECTIVES

- Select and nurture 100 Youth Venture teams.
- Enhance each Youth Venturer's ability to think independently, creatively, and critically, and with empathy.
- Recruit Youth Venture candidates from diverse economic backgrounds and ethnicities.

In a homogeneous country like Japan, diverse Youth Venture members can provide other Youth Venturers with the opportunity to better understand the realities in Japan. In November 2019, we selected the first immigrant youth from the Philippines, and other Youth Venturers learned about the harsh reality of racism in Japan from him.

- Change the mindset of adults so they see their role not as lecturers, but as listeners who trust youth to make their own decisions.
- Change the mindset of adults from one that thinks youth know little to nothing to one that recognizes the potential of youth as changemakers essential to Japan's future.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Ashoka Japan's Youth Venture Program is a network of next generation leaders from throughout Japan who are chosen through a rigorous selection process. Selection Panel members are looking for Youth Venturers, aged 12-20, who exhibit empathy, intelligence, and leadership. They also must have an intrinsic desire to make their communities a better place through projects that address societal issues they find they cannot ignore. The "societal issues" they find problematic are not necessarily considered problems by adults or the media.

Ashoka Japan provides Youth Venturers with a place to test their ideas and challenge their thinking through self-reflection and conversations among peers through opportunities that bring them together formerly and informally. Ashoka Japan places an emphasis on Youth Venturers learning from each other rather than having adults advising them on what they should do. Ashoka Japan has a strict rule of not letting adults intervene during the year because we believe that in order for the Youth Venturer to grow and become confident in their thinking and abilities, they need an environment free from outside judgment, advice, praise or criticism. Ashoka Japan encourages taking risks, and is not concerned with failure. Youth Venturers are told that they can learn and grow through failure, and Ashoka Japan nurtures a culture that supports this idea. Embracing failure is a powerful antidote to prevailing Japanese norms.

Each year, Youth Venturers organize the "We Are The Change" conference. This daylong conference, which is open to the public, is developed, organized, and implemented by Youth Venturers from beginning to end. Ashoka Japan staff are available for guidance when asked. The "We Are The Change" conference is an important opportunity for Youth Venturers to speak publicly about both their successes and failures, to learn from each other, and to receive questions from an audience. This is a safe place where they can share their fears and failures, and be vulnerable.

In spring 2019, Ashoka Japan organized the first "Youth Changemakers Exchange" to further inspire Youth Venturers. It was a nine-day trip to New York City and Swarthmore College.⁷ They visited two

⁷ <https://www.swarthmore.edu/>

Ashoka Fellows,⁸ Sascha Haselmayer,⁹ Founder of CityMart,¹⁰ and Marcus Soutra, co-founder of Eye-to-Eye¹¹, and engaged with Swarthmore College student changemakers. The impact on the participating six Youth Venturers and the three young adult chaperones from this visit was significant, and in some cases life changing. One of them decided to leave the prestigious university she was attending in Japan and another decided to apply to college in the U.S.

The second “Youth Changemakers Exchange,” scheduled in March 2020, was cancelled due to COVID-19. Therefore we organized an intimate virtual discussion between Sascha Haselmayer, the founder of CityMart, and four Youth Venturers in June 2020. This was an opportunity for the four Youth Venturers to speak about their work in front of a leading social entrepreneur and to learn from his innovative journey. After the discussion, the founder of Ashoka Japan received an email from Shun Kuroda, a current 16 year-old Youth Venturer, who wrote “When I first read about CityMart, I thought Sascha was a genius and there was no way I could copy what he did and does. But after hearing him talk, I realized his uncompromised empathy for people who live in cities made his work so impactful. I am adopting his values in my work!”

Ashoka Japan plans to continue virtual discussions between Youth Venturers and prominent Ashoka Fellows until in-person visits become possible. Potential Ashoka Fellows include David Green¹² who created a system to deliver cataract surgery to the poorest populations in the world, saving over 1.2 million people’s eyesight yearly; Jerry White,¹³ Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and a leader working to eradicate the use of landmines; Bart Weetjens,¹⁴ who realized rats could sniff out landmines and works to train rats and handlers to locate landmines; and Hasina Kharbhih,¹⁵ who created the first effective model to end human trafficking.

While adults have limited involvement in the work of Youth Venturers, if Youth Venturers find they need professional help, such as the advice of a lawyer, Ashoka Japan will help them obtain the expertise they need. For example, one Youth Venturer needed legal advice on copyright law. We connected him with the law firm Latham & Watkins, which is also Ashoka’s global strategic partner.

Informally, Youth Venturers organize their own get-togethers to share information and learn from each other. These gatherings take place over pizza or conference calls.

Ashoka Japan receives program support, expertise, and access to Ashoka Global’s network of Fellows or Young Ashoka Changemakers (global network of high-level young changemakers). This enables us to implement programs like the “Youth Changemakers Exchange” and develop Youth Venturer discussions with leading social entrepreneurs such as Sascha Haselmayer, who was mentioned above. As a member of Ashoka Global’s network of country programs, we pay a global service fee to Ashoka Global.

⁸ Ashoka Fellows are the world’s leading social entrepreneurs. They champion innovative new ideas that transform society’s systems, providing benefits for everyone and improving the lives of millions of people.

<https://www.ashoka.org/en/ashoka-fellows>

⁹ <http://bit.ly/SaschaHaselmayerBio>

¹⁰ <https://www.citymart.com/>

¹¹ <https://eyetoeyenational.org/>

¹² <http://bit.ly/DavidGreenBio>

¹³ <http://bit.ly/JerryWhiteBio>

¹⁴ <https://bartweetjens.be>

¹⁵ <https://www.hasinakharbhih.com/>

Project Managers

In year one, in addition to a Project Manager in the Tokyo headquarters, Ashoka Japan will recruit three Project Managers from three different regions of Japan. For years two and three, we will add one more Project Manager from an area yet to be determined. Project Managers must share our vision of nurturing next generation changemakers who are the key to revitalizing Japan. These changemakers are critical to rejuvenating a country in decline due to societal structures based on a rigid hierarchy, and a culture that focuses on seniority and rules rather than humanity and individual happiness.

The five locations were chosen based on the presence of strong project manager candidates, and because they are potential “hot spots” for social innovation in Japan.

- ① Tokyo metropolitan area and suburbs
- ② Kansai region (Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto)
- ③ Tohoku region (Sendai, Fukushima)
- ④ Kumamoto and surrounding area
- ⑤ The 2nd and 3rd year, TBD



Project Managers are responsible for identifying and recommending Youth Venturer candidates. In a society where being different from others often results in ostracization, finding candidates requires extra effort, especially in provincial areas.

Once the candidates are lined up, we organize a Selection Panel. At the Panel, candidates present their ideas and actions in front of three to four people. The presentation itself typically last about 15 minutes.

Once the presentations are complete, a Q&A session between the panelists and each presenter takes place for 15-30 minutes. We then end with a Q&A session between the audience and each presenter, which lasts about 15 minutes.

Selection Criteria

Ashoka Japan Youth Venturer criteria:

- Is the candidate’s motivation for change intrinsic? In other words, does his/her desire to make a change come from the heart? Some candidates do not realize what they think is “a problem” is actually an idea from the media or the adults around them. They do not have an intrinsic link to the issue.
- Does the candidate have the resilience to pursue the change she wants to make for at least a year, and the grit to overcome hurdles? (Changing approaches in the course of the year is acceptable.)
- Does the candidate fit in with Ashoka’s culture, which values integrity, empathy, honesty, and openness?

Training Panelists

We invite influential players from business, academia and civic sectors as panelists. We train them to be a listener and hold off judgment on what the Youth Venturer candidates are trying to achieve, to ask questions that trigger self-reflection, and to get to know the candidates as people. Panel sessions are an opportunity for adults (panelists) to learn. They are expected to remove any bias they may have about youth, such as young people know less and adults need to help them. We ask them to listen to the candidates carefully and deeply and to consciously remove any preconceptions they might have about the candidates.

Seed Money

Once selected, each Youth Venture team will be given \$700 of seed money to be used to help them cover costs related to their project. Managing these funds trains them on how to plan and budget to achieve their goals.

Funds can cover the cost of items such as transportation, fees for event venues, and communication. Each Youth Venture team is required to submit expense reports, including receipts. However, we do not micromanage their spending. We trust them to spend the money wisely and honestly. In the past, a couple of Youth Venturers voluntarily reimbursed us for part of their seed money because their projects did not require use of all the funds. Additionally, we had a Youth Venturer make a donation to the Youth Venturer program after she graduated from college and found employment.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES & BENCHMARKS

Ashoka Japan expects the following outcomes and will assess the success of the project by the following benchmarks.

1. Ashoka Japan, working with five Project Managers from five regions of Japan, will **select and nurture 100 Youth Venture teams** between July 2020 and June 2023.

Benchmarks:

- Did Ashoka Japan succeed in recruiting 100 Youth Venture teams over the three years? Team size typically ranges from 2-5 students, resulting in 300-400 team members.

Based on our experience selecting Youth Venturers in Japan since 2012, we anticipate that approximately sixty percent of the students who present their ideas will be selected.

Through this three-year acceleration project, made possible with the five Project Managers, Ashoka Japan will double the number of youth changemaker teams in three years.

- Did Ashoka Japan recruit candidates from diverse economic backgrounds and ethnicities? This will be one of Ashoka Japan's toughest challenges. Ninety-seven point nine percent of Japanese residents are ethnically Japanese, and the government resists accepting foreigners. For example, Japan accepted only 42 refugees in 2018. Immigrants are considered a source of labor, and there is no public support to help them assimilate and become part of Japanese society.

Given Japan's educational system, it is difficult to engage any Japanese student in the Youth Venture program, much less students who are less well off or from a minority community. Once identified, the next challenge is finding those who are a fit for the Youth Venture

program. That said, Ashoka Japan is dedicated and determined to identifying as diverse a group as possible.

2. Does each Youth Venturer **grow in terms of his/her ability to think independently, creatively and critically**? This can be difficult to measure, but we are looking to see if there is growth, not perfection.

Benchmarks:

- Independent thinking: Through direct conversation and observation, we are interested in whether the Youth Venturers are able to be reflective and understand societal problems intrinsically, or are they dependent on the thinking of others (parents, mentors, the media, for example).
- Creative thinking: As Youth Venturers think about their projects, and potential challenges, how do they approach problem solving? To what extent are they able to think outside box or do they undertake only what is safe and easy?
- Critical thinking: To what extent are Youth Venturers able to analyze an issue, evaluate pros and cons, problem solve, reflect on what it means to them, and come to a decision that is true to themselves?

3. Seniority and hierarchy are so engrained in Japanese culture that we need to focus on **changing the mindset of adults in Japan**. We seek to change the role of adults when they interact with youth in Japan. Currently, adults are seen as the ones with all the answers and youth as less developed, less capable, less aware and less intelligent than grown-ups. To change the mindset of adults, we will involve adults as panelists, invite adults to observe the selection process, send online stories of young changemakers to adults, and invite adults to attend Ashoka Japan's annual "We Are The Change" conference.

Benchmarks:

- What feedback do we receive from the adults who participate? Did we succeed in changing adult minds about how to work with youth leaders? Our conversations will be guided by the following questions:
 - Do they see the Youth Venturers as intelligent and capable?
 - Are they comfortable with listening and providing guidance only when asked?
 - Have perceptions about adults as the only ones with knowledge changed?
 - How have adult relationships and interactions with Youth Venturers and other young people in their life changed?

REQUEST

Ashoka Japan requests US \$130,840 over three years.

Ashoka Japan has raised US \$150,000 over three years from an anonymous donor.

Youth Venture Three-Year Acceleration Project [YVAP] 2020-2023	
Three Year Budget (US dollars)	Total
Honorarium for Project Managers	
\$1,000/month x 12 months x 14ppl	\$168,000
Seed Money for Youth Venturers	
\$700 x 100 Youth Venture Teams	\$70,000
Ashoka Global Support Fee	
18% of budget	\$42,840
TOTAL	\$280,840

***Contribution is accepted through Ashoka Global that is 501(C)(3)nonprofit org.**