

Only 20 to 24 per cent of Tohoku high school graduates pursue further education. Although this figure is only slightly below the national average of 30 per cent, it is the poorest showing for any region in the country.

Nationally, Sendai's publicly funded Tohoku University enjoys a good reputation. In addition, 33 regional universities support total enrollment of over 100 000 students. In Sendai, there is also an international school which offers primary and secondary classes in English.

## Geography and Transportation

Largely mountainous, with numerous basins, mountain valleys and narrow coastal plains, Tohoku covers over 79 000 km<sup>2</sup>, an area larger than Ireland. It lies at the same latitude as New York City, and most of its towns and cities are concentrated along the coasts or tucked into the several inland basins.

Although Miyagi prefecture accounts for little more than 10 per cent of the entire region, 40 per cent of all Tohoku land that is classified as suitable for construction is located here. Situated 350 km northeast of Tokyo, the capital city of Sendai stands on a broad plain between the Pacific Ocean and a low range of mountains to the west. It is more spacious than most Japan cities and promotional material proudly proclaims that over 60 per cent of Sendai is green space.

The region's climate is fairly mild, although temperatures at sea level along the Pacific coast often dip below freezing in the winter, and areas bordering the Japan Sea record heavy winter snowfalls. In summer, Yamagata City, located in a central valley, claims distinction as Japan's hottest city.

Construction of expressway and shinkansen links since the 1970s has brought Sendai within easy access of Tokyo. The 350-km journey takes 4.5 hours by road and just over 90 minutes by shinkansen. To the northwest, Niigata is directly connected to Tokyo via the Joetsu shinkansen, a train ride of approximately 90 minutes.

Further north, only those communities lining the central valley enjoy similarly good service. From Sendai, the main expressway and the shinkansen line parallel each other for 170 km to Morioka, the capital of Iwate prefecture. The shinkansen terminates in Morioka, but the expressway continues on to Aomori at the northern tip of Honshu, with a branch running to Misawa. Three conventional rail lines also run north to Aomori and the mouth of the Seikan Tunnel to Hokkaido.

Future plans include extending the shinkansen to Aomori, thereby completing Tohoku's twin transportation spine. Along the route, expressway branches will be added to link cities on the Japan Sea with trunk routes. A route to Yamagata City is near completion and another to Akita City should be finished by 1998. A mini-shinkansen from Fukushima to Yamagata is also nearly finished. Running on upgraded conventional track, these trains will slash travel time from Yamagata to Tokyo.

Although these improvements will allow Tohoku better access to Tokyo, reaching the rest of the country is still a difficult task. Trucks must travel through the capital (which can easily add half a day to travel times), or bypass it on slow-moving conventional roads.

However, with completion by 1997 of an east-west route from the Tohoku Expressway in Fukushima to Iwaki on the Pacific coast and Niigata on the Japan Sea, Sendai and other mid-Tohoku centres may evolve as national distribution points.

The link to Niigata will allow Tohoku truckers direct access to Kansai (bypassing Tokyo) via the Hokuriku Expressway. Access to Nagoya will be provided by a link now under construction from the Hokuriku Expressway at Naoetsu to the Chuo Expressway at Suwa. Meanwhile, the eastern link to Iwaki will provide a second route into Tokyo via the Joban Expressway.

For Canadian lumber exporters and other foreign suppliers, these new links could make Sendai a viable national distribution centre. Sendai's well-developed port — where work is underway to build a new container terminal and to expand other facilities — is approximately 500 km closer to Vancouver than the port at Yokohama, and offers quick, uncongested access to the expressway system and three north-south railway lines. The city's lower land prices should also make warehousing cheaper.

Nine airports connect Tohoku with major national hubs. Sendai airport offers limited service to other Asian countries and local leaders hope to attract international carriers by extending runways to 3 000 m. Although potential passenger volume from Sendai is limited, the airport could serve as an alternative to congested Narita for air-cargo carriers. Niigata airport offers service to the Commonwealth of Independent States (Khabarovsk) and to Seoul.