

Shokasonjuku was active as a private academy from 1842 to 1892 and is regarded as one of the most important schools in Japanese history. Of the 92 students who attended lectures over the year that Yoshida Shoin (1830–1859) taught here, from 1857 to 1858, two became prime ministers, many became high-level bureaucrats, and almost all contributed to the birth of modern Japan during the Meiji period (1868–1912).

The small school's comparatively large impact was due to the leadership of Yoshida Shoin. Born in 1830 to a samurai family of the lowest rank, he grew up helping on his family's farm. Because his family was not wealthy, young Shoin received his education from his father as he worked alongside him. This learn-by-doing approach would come to define his future teaching style.

In 1854, Shoin was sent home to Hagi and placed under house arrest after attempting to board one of the “black ships” that American Commodore Matthew Perry used to intimidate the shogunate into opening Japan's ports. He had read of the defeat of China's Qing dynasty in the Opium Wars, and having seen the West's technological superiority for himself, Shoin became convinced that in order to defend itself Japan had to modernize both technologically and socially. Already known as a teacher in his hometown of Hagi, after his arrest he began lecturing from his small room, and news of his revolutionary teachings spread by word of mouth.

From the Shokasonjuku Academy, Shoin taught military tactics, philosophy, history, agriculture and more; in his teaching he drew on the intellectual traditions of Japan, China, and the West. His main goal, however, was to teach his students how to contribute to society regardless of their social standing. Although he was eventually summoned to Edo (Tokyo) and put to death for plotting to attack a government official in Kyoto, Shoin's ambition and ideals carried on through his students.