



## Today's Goals for Education Reform

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All through the ages, nations facing crossroads or striving toward a better future invariably emphasize the importance of education. Japan is one such nation that has historically valued education.

### **I A brief history of education in Japan**

During the Nara Period (710-794), national universities for aristocrats were established in the capital and universities for local overlords' children in provincial regions to educate future officials. Although not as widely known, in Kyoto in the Heian Period (828), Kukai, Kobo Daishi opened a private educational institution for Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist teachings that accepted common people. Its educational philosophy of “integrated learning as the first step to wisdom” is still as true as ever.

In every period thereafter, aristocrats, priests, warriors, and other upper classes seem to have provided high-level education to their successors. Examples are Buddhist temples that taught doctrine, priests who pursued academic studies, and specialists who were trained in the arts, producing excellent scholars and powerful rulers. However, these efforts were regionally based and not part of a national school system.

During the Edo Period, domain public schools and semi-public schools were established in each domain to provide intensive education in studies introduced from China and Confucianism. At the same time excellent private schools where some of the brightest gathered to study, appeared across the nation and developed future leaders. It is worth noting that temple schools and/or small private elementary schools named *Terakoya* for common people were set up all over the nation to teach reading, writing and calculation to children regardless of their social class. *Terakoya* schooling was a pride of Japan and later became the basis of our national education system.

### **The first education reform**

It was the education law of 1872, after the Meiji Restoration, that marked the beginning of our nation's full-scale national education system. However, the effective implementation of a formally legislated, modernized education system based on school districts across the nation for universities (which were subdivided for middle schools and further subdivided for elementary schools) took many years and several revisions. In 1885, Arinori Mori became Japan's first Minister of Education, and a basic school system compatible with the demands of the nation and societal development was launched.

This process in the Meiji Period was Japan's first major education reform. In those days, Japanese society was generating momentum to catch up with western nations, which were far ahead in every aspect of modernization. Education was no exception. Japan adopted western systems and

drastically shifted its curriculum from traditional Chinese studies to western studies.

The new system implemented elementary schools uniformly across the nation, where children of both sexes could acquire basic academic skills. Some high-level middle and upper schools were positioned as preparatory schools for advanced education. At the same time, new lines of normal schools and specialized training schools were established, forming a multiple-track educational system. Following this, the nationwide school system with its educational content and textbook system was soon organized.

### **The second education reform**

The second major reform was the introduction of the American school system after World War II. Whereas the United States employs state school systems, Japan, under the leadership of MacArthur's General Headquarters, employed a 6-3-3-4 (years of elementary, junior high, high school, and university) school system uniformly across the nation. This single-track system, which replaced the multiple-track system, still continues today and characterizes our system in both positive and negative ways. The principles of gender equality and an open school system that allow all students to receive advanced education according to their performance have contributed to the development of a vibrant, quality workforce for Japan. The foundation formed by the pre-war system and the advances achieved by the new system were the underlying strengths that enabled the nation's economic boom after the war.

These two cardinal reforms were implemented in line with the dynamic transformation of Japan's national structure. Thereafter, further changes have been discussed and attempted under the initiatives of Prime Ministers and Ministers of Education and with the efforts of educators. Today, the need for a third major reform has been drawing attention.

### **Today's need for education reform**

There are three stimuli for today's movement toward education reform.

The first is the fundamental problem of rapid depopulation expected in the near future due to low birth rates. The population of 18-year-olds, which was 2.05 million in 1967, is now 1.2 million and expected to fall to one half of its peak in the next 15 years. We have never experienced such a low birth rate and aging of society before. As this situation worsens, will our children still be able to create lives that are productive and satisfying? Now is the time to help them acquire the ability to think and act for themselves.

The second stimulus is the globalization triggered by the Internet that has been spreading rapidly since the mid 1990s. Skills to thrive in the global age are essentials that children of the future should acquire and that must be a focus of our education system. English skills, international awareness and self-assertion, which many Japanese find difficult, will be very important.

The third stimulus is our need for competent human resources capable of overcoming new problems that we will encounter in the uncertain path of our future. Japan is currently facing the inevitable challenges of an enormous budget deficit and increasing social security costs but has found no perfect solution. Poor in natural resources, Japan has established its position by continuing to be a top runner globally in science and technologies. In recent years, such serious concerns as stagnating financial budgets for university research and weakening researcher pools have developed. It is a critical mission for education to cultivate human resources who fight challenges with creativity, innovative power, and the ability to collaborate with others.

## **II Current elementary and junior high school education**

In my view, the purpose of compulsory education is to form children's views and attitudes through intellectual, moral and physical education and ultimately to develop good citizens.

As for intellectual education, the confusion caused by the *yutori kyoiku* (relaxed education policies) in the beginning of the 21st century has been rectified, and today, under the revised curriculum, elementary and junior high schools are providing more academically focused education and achieving intended results.

In April 2001, I was unexpectedly appointed Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. *Yutori kyoiku* had been set to begin exactly one year later in all elementary and junior high schools according to the new curriculum guidelines, which established fewer class hours and educational contents, fewer textbooks, a five-day school week, an absolute rather than relative evaluation method, and a new integrated study program. Parents, the media, and caring citizens were all strongly concerned about the possible deterioration of our children's academic ability.

Deciding that this situation would cause serious future problems, I issued an unprecedented ministerial authorization to schools and education boards across the nation to enable them to take individual measures to assure basic academic levels appropriate to their goals, specifically suggesting possible actions to prevent "relaxation" from becoming "laxity". This appeal encouraged schools to make their own efforts and later the Ministry to revise its guidelines, increasing the class hours and textbooks for a richer education. The improvement was evident in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in which today Japan's high scores in every subject has vindicated my judgement.

Every country devises its own methods of moral education based on its national policies. Moral education in Japan, discontinued after the war, has been formally reinstated; however, without textbooks or enthusiastic teachers, it has been impossible to teach children normative consciousness at school. Recently, the Central Council for Education and the Curriculum Council have been showing progress in including moral education in the curriculum as a special subject, and textbooks are being prepared. Moral education is expected to start in elementary schools in 2018 and in junior high schools in 2019. It is my hope that the new moral education will help nourish spirituality in our children.

### **Future challenges in elementary and junior high schools**

Although acclaimed internationally, Japanese compulsory education still has some issues. One is that it fosters a passive attitude in students: while they are good at learning what they are taught, they tend to lack the ability to think for themselves, identify problems, and take action to solve them. In addition, they need to learn how to express their opinions, communicate and collaborate, which along with English and ICT are skills essential to their future.

The importance of active learning has recently received focus in the development of children's creativity and their ability to solve problems independently and communicate with others. While I think it is a natural course for the future, there are administrative challenges, such as improvement in teacher commitment and skills and reductions in class size, to achieve this goal. At the same time, the work hours of Japanese teachers are among the longest in the world. We must reduce their burden and create a better environment by reviewing their responsibilities and increasing our teaching professionals.

Another example of recent effort is the linkage between elementary and junior high schools. While elementary homeroom teachers teach all subjects and monitor every student, junior high students face a different teacher for each subject. It has been pointed out for some time that this environmental change, called "7th grade gap", causes some children to feel insecure. Although elementary schools have attempted to deal with this problem through partial introduction of

subject-based teaching, further efforts are necessary.

Educational continuity from primary through junior high levels, in which both schools are on the same property and students in principle attend all nine years there, has been legislated as a style of schooling. I support this measure to prevent the 7th grade gap and ensure educational coherency. However, an earlier implementation of continuous education from junior high through high school has also proved effective in some cases. Primary and junior high continuity should be implemented with due consideration of local requirements.

In addition to these measures for academic and institutional improvement, learning to appreciate nature, art and traditional Japanese culture, as well as having challenging but interesting work experiences, is extremely important for children of this age group: Learning through experience is motivating and achievement tends to be memorable. I also want the younger generation to acquire the spirit of kindness and generosity toward others and to understand the importance of respecting individual uniqueness and diverse values. These are challenges to be undertaken not solely by schools but in cooperation with families.

### **III Challenges in high school education**

In contrast to our world-class compulsory education, our upper secondary education has suffered an accumulation of unsolved problems such as gaps in educational content and level among schools, failure to achieve curricula, and lack of collaboration with tertiary institutions.

The high school enrollment rate reached 90% in 1971 and has stayed at a level of 98% for years. In the 1970s, when Japan's economy was growing rapidly, high school graduates were welcomed by industry and contributed substantially to our prosperity. Accordingly, vocational high schools — industrial, commercial, and agricultural high schools—accounted for 40% of all upper secondary institutions.

Since then, university enrollment rates have risen, and academic and integrated (vocational and academic) high schools have become the mainstream. While this change was driven by increased student and parent preference for non-vocational courses, a new problem of students who lag academically has caused concern. One future challenge will be to increase the proportion of vocational schools, where students can be newly motivated through the acquisition of occupational skills and practical experience.

Another problem is the gap in educational content and quality among high schools. Some students graduate without even understanding simple mathematics. In most schools, including high-ranked schools, where courses are elective, student choices tend to be biased, allowing them to graduate without taking unpopular subjects such as mathematics, physics and chemistry, leaving them without the basic knowledge required in university and for employment. Not having learned Japanese or world history, many high school graduates do not have a clear perception of domestic history or the history of our nation's overseas relationships, which will be required when they assume responsibility in the international community.

It is alarming that our students cannot receive the education they need during this crucial period in their lives when their minds are formative. We must specify and make mandatory the basic knowledge that all students should acquire, reviewing the curricula, teaching methods and the textbooks. I am pleased that recently educational administration has at last focused on this matter and initiated reform.

#### **Review of high school education content and cooperation with universities**

Much of the bias in subject selection by students can be attributed to those private universities and colleges that require minimal entrance test subjects or that attempt to secure students through

Administration Office (AO) entrance examinations regardless of their academic grades. As the number of children declines, such scrambling for students will intensify. On the other hand, there is a concern that students in high-ranked schools spend too much of their time studying hard and competing in entrance examinations. I believe there are some gifted science students with brilliant prospects whom we should offer more flexible opportunities, such as special curricula or advanced placement, so that they can focus earlier on their specializations

Recently, there have been discussions on reforming three challenges integrally—high school education content, the role and management of university education, and university entrance screening—to establish high school and university liaison for the new era. I have high expectations for this prospect. For example, a coming review of the National Center Test for University Admissions is expected to discuss how to evaluate the achievements of high school education in the entrance examinations. Universities and colleges should seriously consider what types of students they would like to attract and take the initiative in planning and implementing the selection methods. The Japanese selection system still lags behind the autonomous screening of practices enjoyed by prominent American universities, and the reform process still has high hurdles to clear.

#### **IV University reform**

As the ultimate stage of a nation's education system, universities are extremely important for their students, the society which will incorporate their graduates into the workforce, and for the nation. There are various political, economic and social opinions and expectations regarding their responsibilities. Especially in the global age, they are inevitably exposed to international evaluation and demands of the government and industry to improve their quality of education and research.

##### **Japanese universities: history and issues**

Our modern university system was introduced in 1886, when Tokyo Imperial University was established on the model of western, especially German, universities. This model soon spread nationwide. Since then, private universities and colleges with unique characters have gradually multiplied, but while numerous changes have been proposed successively under national leaders, the framework has remained to this day without any major reform. Under the influence of the German model, Japanese universities tend to focus on academic pursuit led by dominant professors. After World War II, a major reform was mandated under the strong instruction and leadership of the United States Occupation. Universities, *special schools*, high schools and normal schools were integrated as *shinsei daigaku* (universities and colleges under the new system). However, despite the new system, the schools retained much of their former character and were far from realizing the new American university policies placing importance on education. That was probably one remote cause of the student activism and diverse criticisms of Japanese university education that continue today.

##### **Tides of university reform**

However, as the circumstances surrounding the Japanese economy have changed dramatically through our post-war growth and later stagnation, universities were not allowed to bow to inertia. There have been successive tides of university reform since the 1990s. The ideal direction of reform was promulgated in excellent reports presented mainly by the University Council, an advisory body for the Education Minister (unfortunately discontinued in administrative restructuring), and in the Central Education Council incorporation of the opinions of universities.

Some universities took this opportunity to review their curricula, educational methods and organization. In the late 1980s, I as a ministry department manager took part in establishing the University Council and supervised reform as the director general in the early 1990s. At the outset of the 21st century, I was appointed Minister of Education to lead the major reform of incorporating our national universities.

I am a supporter of the view that university reform is the essence of quality improvement in Japanese education: changes in tertiary education will initiate changes in secondary education, which in turn will affect primary education.

### **University reform driven by incorporation of national universities**

Immediately after my inauguration as Minister in the storm of structural reform, arguments about privatizing national universities erupted. We made the bold decision to incorporate them in order to prevent the base of Japanese academic studies from being undermined. In 2004, our national universities were converted from affiliates of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to corporate entities capable of autonomous management, as required by the National University Corporation Law of 2002, and they began to revitalize. Because of its significant impact, university incorporation has been called the greatest reform since the establishment of *shinsei daigaku*.

Incorporation granted these universities discretion in organizational, budgetary, and personnel decisions and made them independent bodies which can deal flexibly and non-bureaucratically with globalization. Unfortunately, however, the nation's financial deterioration during this time has affected university budgets and made it difficult for them to fully enjoy the benefits of autonomy.

Subsequently, further institutional reform has been made. With the curtailment of faculty power and university governance reforms, support for their presidential leadership in the reform process has been enhanced. While some universities have taken this opportunity to reform themselves fundamentally, others have lagged behind or have made no apparent changes because of their conservatism. However, the changing times will not allow the latter to survive; every university will need to transform itself as demanded by its mission.

Based on the institutional reform initiated by national university incorporation and subsequent developments, I list below some issues and viewpoints toward reforms in national, public and private universities. Of course, I recognize the diversity of Japan's 800 universities and respect their independence.

#### **1 Improvement in quality of university education**

- Focus on liberal arts
- Improvement of specialized education
- Enhancement of student support and services
- Review of graduate school goals and administration

#### **2 Enhanced leadership of president**

- Enhancement of presidential leadership as the first step in university governance reform
- Extension of presidential authority and responsibilities, reinforcement of presidential support system and clarification of vice-presidential responsibilities
- Presidential initiative in establishing and realizing university's vision
- Discretion of president in reorganization, budget and personnel matters

#### **3 President selection**

- Clarification of president qualifications
- Establishment of fair and transparent selection system
- Selection not by election within the university but by selection committee including external members

#### 4 Employment, salaries, work conditions, and role of faculties

- Open recruitment of capable teachers including foreigners
- Shift to annual salary system
- Establishment of individual evaluation system for teacher performance in education and research and appropriate compensation system; optional higher compensation for prominent international educators
- Review of faculty authority; clarification of their roles

#### 5 Enhancement of research, development and innovation capability

- Research and development in state-of-the-art science and technologies
- Strategic development of human resources in science and engineering
- Acquisition of intellectual property rights; support for university ventures
- Research collaboration with other (including international) universities

#### 6 Promotion of industry-university collaboration; enhancement of system to raise funds from private sector

- Organizing and accounting for industry-university collaboration
- Establishment of system to receive private contributions and to set up courses through donation

#### 7 Enhancement of university's social contribution

- Cooperation with local communities and shift to more open school system
- Measures to give back knowledge and skills to local communities
- Contribution to society through lifelong learning programs; positive reception of adult students

#### 8 Fundamental reform of postgraduate education

- Effective reform of course-based graduate schools; stricter requirements for study hours, especially for arts and social science departments
- Review of post-doctoral system

#### 9 Enhancement of student exchange programs

- Measures for attracting promising foreign students
- Exchange students as bridges between Japan and other countries
- Improvement of support system

### V Conclusion

In this article, I have explained the current situation in the Japanese schooling system and outlined the main reform concerns, although limited space has not permitted my discussion to be comprehensive. In conclusion, I would like to present three points we should keep in mind regarding education reform:

- 1 Good education requires appropriate personnel and infrastructure as well as financial support. According to an OECD study, the Japanese government budget (as a percentage of GDP) allocated for elementary and junior high school education, which is highly evaluated globally, is the second lowest among its member states. And the situation is even worse for universities. Both government and private sectors should understand that adequate financial support is essential for the improvement of education and research.

- 2 The youth of the future should have wide perspectives of the world, the courage to go abroad, and ambitious goals in global activities. In recent years, extremely few Japanese specialists have been employed by international organizations. I hope that as many high school and university students as possible are able to gain experience overseas and expand our pool of internationally competitive human resources. I expect programs such as “Tobitate! Next Japan”, recently launched in public-private collaboration, as well as our schools, to support these young people.
- 3 As stated above, universities should lead the reforms. Universities must take this opportunity to implement fundamental changes, clarifying their own goals and reform targets. I expect them to have diverse panoramic perspectives and a belief in their leading roles in the global age, based on a clear understanding of the history of universities, the tides of reforms and their effects on the entire Japanese education system.

I ask for the support and understanding of our society in the purposeful development of a truly capable workforce with great potential without demanding an immediate abundance of work-ready resources.

I want the universities and their faculties and administrators, as leaders of reform, to take on these challenges with a solid philosophy of how our nation should stand in the future.

**Author profile: Atsuko Toyama**

1962: Graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Tokyo and joined the Ministry of Education.

Her titles were always prefixed by “the first female”. After managing four departments in the ministry, including the Junior High School Department, she became General Manager of the Cultural Affairs Department, Deputy Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, Director General of the Education Aid Bureau, Director General of the Higher Education Bureau, and the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs.



1996: Japanese Ambassador to the Republic of Turkey  
 2000: Director General of the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo.  
 April 2001–September 2003: Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology for the Koizumi Cabinet  
 April 2004–March 2011: President, the New National Theatre Foundation  
 April 2004–June 2015: President, the Panasonic Education Foundation (formerly the Matsushita Education Foundation)  
 During her presidency, launched “Kokoro wo Hagukumu Sogo Forum (Forum for Integrated Mind Education)” in April 2005 and issued a proposal paper on education at home, at school and in the community in January 2007.

March 2007–present: President, Toyota Foundation.

Also currently President of the Japan Ikebana Arts Association and Chief Director of the National Council on Fujisan World Heritage

2013: Received the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun

Main publications:

“Turkey: at the crossroads of the century” (Istanbul : Doğu Grubu İletişim Yayıncılık ve Ticaret)

“Ko kwaru gakko, ko kwaru daigaku” (Kodansha)

“Koshikata no ki—Hitosuji no michi wo ayunde 50 nen” (Kamakura Shunjusha)

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