Education in East Asia

OVERSTRAINED, OUTDATED AND IN NEED OF REFORM

The education systems of Asian nations such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore are the envy of the western world in terms of measured achievements against global standards.

But behind the successes, lurk growing problems of inequality, overemphasis on rote learning, academic corruption and graduates poorly prepared for the world of work. Much needs to change.
The Japanese educational system attracted overwhelming global attention in the 1980s, winning praise for its “superiority.” The US Department of Education, for example, published a high-profile report in 1987 entitled *Japanese Education Today* that scrutinized the realities of Japanese education and sought the “secrets” of its success. The hope was to gain insight and inspiration for America’s own domestic education policy making. The wider backdrop was that the 1980s was a time when the Japanese economy and industries were widely perceived to be on the verge of becoming No.1 in the world, as Ezra Vogel’s provocative bestseller at the time suggested. Vogel explicitly praised Japan’s education in his 1979 book, *Japan as Number One*, noting in particular the high quality of elementary and secondary education, arguing it was strongly linked to the high quality of Japanese industry and society. Interestingly, however, Vogel did not mention the superiority of higher education in Japan. Neither did *Japanese Education Today*, which was all but silent on the quality of Japan’s universities. Some foreign observers even flagged the low quality of university education in Japan, despite their enthusiasm for elementary and secondary education and praise for Japan’s overall success in nurturing high quality human resources.

**Changing Views**

Very soon, however, the golden era of Japanese education came to an abrupt end. The 1990s saw the Japanese economy enter a long downward spiral of stagnation that led to what is now known as the “lost decades.” Even though younger Japanese students continued to perform well in international testing such as the OECD’s PISA, the enthusiasm for Japan’s educational system quickly faded. Today, Japan is rarely cited by outsiders as an example of educational “success.”

These changes in perceptions of Japanese education reflect, among other things, important changes in how people view education in today’s global context. In the 1980s, when Japan’s elementary and secondary educational system was praised internationally, people were concerned about the quality or productivity of the average worker, mostly in manufacturing. That is why the overall reputation of Japan’s education was so high, despite the poor quality of higher education. In the 21st century, however, greater attention is paid to higher levels of education—i.e., universities—because they are viewed as the main field of global competition. In effect, the education-economy linkage has moved “up” to high value-added industries such as the high-tech, biomedical, financial and other service sectors. The recent wide recognition given to several world rankings of universities exemplifies these changed views on education.

At the same time, the increasing international mobility of students in higher education has given rise to another shift. Unlike in elementary or secondary education, older students can move to other countries more easily in pursuit of better educational opportunities. Thus, the increasing number of international students has expanded into a global market, which also contributes to enhancing the importance of university league tables.

International competition in higher education has become more intense and visible, so much so that now governments in advanced countries explicitly formulate policies to lure top-class international students to their nations. Among these initiatives, the Japanese government has recently launched several such policy packages aimed at elevating the global ranking of their universities. These include the “Super Global University” policy and the “Global 30” program. To improve the “international outlook” indicators—the place where Japanese universities fair worse—the plan is rather straightforward: simply increase the number of classes taught in English by three to four times over the next 10 years among selected universities. But what will happen if such policies are implemented without touching on the poor quality of existing university education? To answer this question, we first need to understand the historical background of the comparatively low quality of Japanese university education.

**Behind the Mediocrity**

We begin with several key facts. In Japan, employers do not factor in the university grades of students when they make hiring decisions. Neither do they put a high value on graduate degrees, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. As such, Japanese university students tend to study much less for their classes than those in other advanced countries, yet have no problem graduating. Fewer reading and writing assignments are required of students than in universities in other nations. And finally, students in selective, elite universities are less likely to attend classes than those in less selective post-secondary institutions. All these facts have been established in empirical research on education in Japan. These facts also coincide with foreign observations regarding the poor quality of Japanese university education.

How is it possible that university education in Japan has remained unchanged, despite the country’s advanced economy? A brief history of the development of the relationships between education and employment can yield a preliminary answer.
During the era of rapid economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese employers created a unique human resources management system in which job demarcations were blurred, workers rotated across different kinds of jobs to acquire multiple skills and a seniority-based promotion and wage system was developed and implemented. All these practices were thought reasonable and efficient under the conditions of long-term employment, often called simply “lifetime employment.” This personnel management system was developed by employers who faced the prospect of long-lasting labor shortages in a booming industrial economy. In order to retain well-trained workers, these relatively unique incentives were introduced.

In this system, occupational skills were learned on the job with job rotations. Given the advanced occupational skills involved, these jobs obviously required long training periods. Once workers acquired these skills, they were expected to stay with the same employers. Related seniority-based promotion and wage schemes fit well, incentivizing workers to stay with the same employer. In general, it was believed that the longer workers stayed, the more skillful they were, and so the more they should be paid.

In this system, employers heavily emphasized “trainability” — the ability to learn company-specific skills quickly and effectively on the job. Trainability was given the most emphasis in hiring decisions, even more than any occupational skills that job seekers might have already acquired in other workplaces. That is, employers preferred fresh school graduates who had not been trained in other places before, because they were thought to be more flexible and trainable. To screen new employees to determine their level of trainability, employers looked simply at which school or university a student graduated from as an indicator.

There was good reason for employers to believe in such “simple” linkages. Hard work as well as efficient learning skills were essential qualities needed to pass rigorous university entrance examinations, particularly in the boom years and especially for selective and prestigious universities. Therefore, as far as employers were concerned, more weight was placed on which universities job candidates graduated from than what they learned there or how they performed on the job. Trainability was given the most emphasis in hiring decisions, even more than any occupational skills that job seekers might have already acquired in other workplaces.

The goals were so clear and tangible that students found good reasons to work hard to get into a selective high school, then into a selective university — stepping stones for successful future careers. Results of exams were decisive to future success beyond education. Thus, if students could succeed in entering a prestigious university, regardless of what they learned there, they could expect to be offered life-long employment in a large, successful corporation, therefore enjoying more stability and greater benefits. We should note that, at that time, it was virtually only male students who were privileged to be on this right track. Female students tended to be excluded.

Put simply, the original system created a visible “labor queue” among all school graduates who finished in the same academic year. Since hiring decisions were specific to those who completed education in the same academic year, the relative positions of individuals in the queue determined their job opportunities. Graduates from the top-ranked universities stood at the front of the line with those from the least prestigious institutions bringing up the rear.

Understanding these hiring practices helps explain why employers do not give weight to high marks in college and very little to postgraduate degrees, especially in social sciences,
but also even MBAs. This also helps explain why students in elite universities attend classes less often compared with those in less prestigious universities, where students try to improve their relative positions in the queue, even slightly, by studying harder.

These virtuous, self-reinforcing relations between the educational and employment systems made it possible, reasonable and even efficient to produce and sort new workers according to their trainability. It satisfied employer demands and made the relationship between education and economic return very clear for students. This system contributed greatly to strengthening the Japanese economy by providing a “productive” industrial workforce – at least until the early 1990s, when the economy tanked.

BURST BUBBLE, BROKEN SYSTEM
Over the course of the 1990s, following the bursting of Japan’s asset bubble, the globalization of the Japanese economy greatly intensified. Meanwhile, the population of young people has been steadily declining. Accordingly, all the conditions that made the education system effective and workable have begun to erode. Searching for ways out of the prolonged economic slump and facing greater pressure from global competition, employers have been forced to cut labor costs. However, due to the longstanding system that protected regular employees in middle age – those who had been hired with the promise of lifetime employment – employers have been forced to reduce the number of new hires or replace regular employees with temporary workers who could be more easily dismissed.

In 1990, some 20 percent of the workforce was in non-regular positions, but by 2014, that figure had nearly doubled to 37.9 percent. Young adult workers suffered the most from this sudden decline in regular positions. In 2013, 36.1 percent of male workers and 37.7 percent of female workers aged between 25 and 29 were in non-regular positions. Education has mattered greatly here: the higher one’s education, the less likely one would end up in a casual job. Furthermore, those from more selective and prestigious schools tended to be employed in more secure positions.

Such a rapid increase in non-regular workers has had the significant effect of damaging on-the-job training, first, by reducing the number of new hires in full-time jobs, and second, by making job rotations within a company difficult, so that young workers have fewer chances to accumulate multiple occupational skills. These major shifts in employment have, again, disproportionately struck the younger generation.

Facing difficulties in getting secure jobs, younger people have sought higher levels of education. As a result, the enrollment ratio of university education (four-year institutions) increased greatly during the 1990s from 24.6 percent in 1990 to 39.7 percent in 2000 and 49.9 percent in 2013. Now, over half of the same-age population is currently enrolled in four-year universities. Because the size of the younger population is declining and the enrollment capacity of universities has expanded, increasing enrollment for university education does not necessarily mean that competition for admission to universities has intensified. Rather, since the expansion of university capacity has exceeded increases in enrollment, competition to enter universities has eased.

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Since the expansion of university capacity has exceeded increases in enrollment, competition to enter universities has eased. Accordingly, Japan’s renowned “exam hell” has disappeared. This, in turn, has blurred incentives for students to work hard to get into university. In addition, by enrolling more and more first generation students, it is widely held that the overall quality of Japanese university education has further declined in recent decades. With hindsight, it now appears that the former virtuous cycle has stopped working. More accurately, it has shifted to what now resembles a vicious cycle: increasing uncertainty about future careers has weakened incentives for studying hard in school, resulting in declining student achievement. Thus, all these changes may now actually be lowering the level of trainability among youth.

Nonetheless, traditional hiring practices remain almost unchanged. Individuals’ relative positions in the labor queue, determined by the names of universities, is still the most influential factor in hiring decisions by employers. But on-the-job training no longer works effectively. Job turnover among younger generations continues to increase. Yet, employers continue to hire new workers from the front row in the labor queue. This may be reasonable and rational for employers as long as they can employ new regular workers with relatively higher trainability in the queue within the domestic labor market. That is, so long as Japanese companies do not face the real threat of severe global competition in recruiting more talented human resources from all around the world, this peculiar Japanese system can apparently be maintained and so the status quo is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

WAKING UP TO THE PROBLEM
With that said, some adjustments might eventually become the basis for real change. First, public perceptions of the problem are changing rapidly. The national media recently reported the results of a major survey published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication. It reported the rather shocking fact that the average time that Japanese university students spend studying per day (including attending classes) was a mere 3.5 hours. This is even shorter than the 5.2 hours per day by 6th graders in elementary schools.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) pointed to a similar finding, showing how little time Japa-
Japanese university students spend learning/studying as compared to their American peers. A major report published three years ago by MEXT’s Central Council of Education noted that two-thirds of Japanese university students study for less than 5 hours per week for classes compared to only 16 percent of their American counterparts. Furthermore, nearly 10 percent of Japanese students do not study at all for their classes. In pointing this out, the report strongly admonished universities to improve their quality of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the Central Council did not offer any substantial prescriptions. Nor were sufficient additional budget allocations made to support the improvement of university education, presumably since all the recent additional investment has gone towards the globalization policies discussed earlier – policies that might well increase the divide between those chosen as “super global universities” and those not selected, thus resulting in expanding inequality among students.

The MEXT report, in my view, was perhaps the first official policy statement in which the government publicly lamented and criticized the poor quality of Japanese university education with reference to plausible empirical evidence. Until very recently, the poor quality of learning and teaching was not taken seriously or discussed among bureaucrats and policymakers.

WRONG-WAY REFORMS

Behind the scenes one can, of course, see the impact of intensifying global competition on Japanese education. Competition from neighboring countries in East Asia, in particular, is putting pressure on both political and business leaders to intensify their proposals to reform university education and then hastily implement the reforms. One effect of this has been that the government is taking more seriously the quality of higher education. To compete with Asian rivals, however, the government seems primarily to be paying attention to the globalization of higher education. Thirty-seven universities have been selected as “super global universities,” which will receive additional public funding to internationalize their teaching.

Almost none of this, however, refers to substantial plans to improve the quality of teaching in Japanese rather than in English. These rushed globalization reforms will perhaps be successful in increasing the number of classes taught in English within these “super global universities.” This might, in turn, attract international students to study in Japan. But these students will sooner or later realize the poor quality of classes in the Japanese context. Unless the quality of teaching and learning overall, including in Japanese, is improved, it is hard to see how Japanese universities will attract or impress outsiders.

Breaking the hiring system based on the domestic labor queue should be the real key to change, but the reform plans seem to leave it untouched. Reforms targeted at globalization might effectively polish the image of Japanese universities, but this will only be at a superficial level. Without providing effective plans and support to improve the quality of education, superficial internationalization can only result in lowering further the global competitiveness of the Japanese workforce, even while expanding inequality among universities and students.

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