

# The Current State and Future Tasks of Japan's Career Education Promotion Policies—Embarking on the Road Less Traveled

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This paper looks at the current state of, background to, and future tasks related to career education promotion policies at Japanese elementary and secondary education levels. The Introduction describes the particular features of Japan's school education considered necessary in order to understand the state of career education, such as the class or homeroom teacher allocation throughout elementary and secondary school education and the entrance examination system for senior high schools. Subsequently the first half of this paper discusses about a proposal, with reasons, for career education in Japan, in particular, the increase in young people either without work or in insecure working arrangements, and the effects of relaxing the formerly highly competitive entrance examinations system. In the second half, the author describes the impact of "Career Start Week" campaign (2005-2008), which has revitalized work experience programs within junior high schools, and of the "Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education" (2008), and both summarizes and provides verified data-based results relating to policies promoting career education. Finally, this paper looks at the division of roles between the central government and regional governments, which is in a period of transition, and picks up important issues for the future relating to the creation of new frameworks to improve the quality of career education practice. In working towards this, the author concludes that Japan is truly embarking on the road less—or perhaps almost never—traveled.

## I. Introduction: Who Is Implementing Career Education in Japan's Schools?

Within American schools—particularly high schools—the school counselor plays a central role in operating a range of programs to support students in career development. Finnish secondary schools' activities center on a career counselor known as *Opinto-Ohjaaja*, while in England, career formation support is provided through partnerships between schools and advisors that belong to regional organizations known as Connexions Services. In Europe, in fact, many countries provide career support through partnerships with organizations outside the schools. Particular examples of this are the *UU-center* (*Ungdommens Uddannelsesvejledning Center*: youth guidance centers) in Denmark, or Germany's BIZ (*Berufs Information Zentrum*: job information centers).

Japan, on the other hand, gives the responsibility for career education to members of school teaching staff, each of whom has their own subject to teach. Individual career counseling is also implemented by general members of the teaching staff. Schools with their own career counselor are extremely rare exceptions to the rule, and partnerships with external organizations are nowhere near as developed as they are in Europe. In cases where partnerships are entered into, the organizations involved offer a widely varying degree and type of

services, which are decided upon by the respective schools by trial and error.

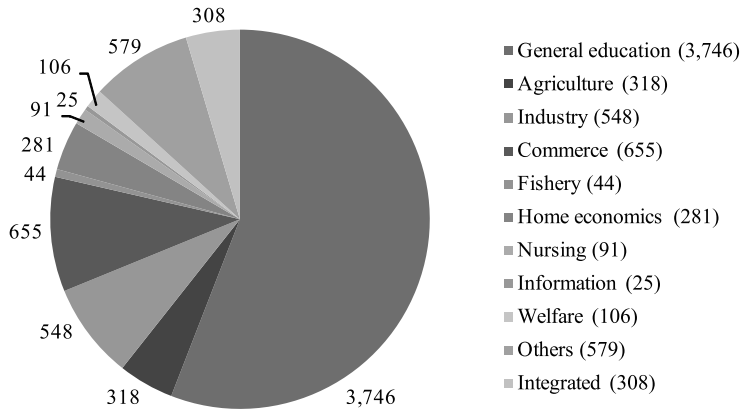
This situation comes about mainly because of the class teacher system universal throughout elementary and secondary schools in Japan. During compulsory education (which consists of six years of primary schooling followed by three years of lower secondary, or junior high schooling) and also during the three years of upper secondary or senior high school education, which is the major form of continuing education engaged in by Japanese students after their compulsory education ends, students take the majority of lessons in their own designated "homeroom" class. It is rare to find a school in Japan, other than a few senior high schools offering what is known as "integrated course," where students move classrooms in the break between each lesson as they do in American high schools, filling the corridors as they transfer to their next class. In other vast majority cases, students move classroom only for subjects such as physical education, art, or science classes where experiments are being carried out. For the rest of the time, they are taught almost exclusively in their homerooms. The maximum number of students who may occupy one homeroom is 40, and these students will spend much of the school year being taught in the same group in the same classroom.

In addition to the above, an educational program known as "class activities" (in elementary/junior high school) or "homeroom activities" (in senior high school) takes place once per week in all schools. This involves group work and discussion-based activities, during which students learn how to form positive relationships, plan how to enjoy class and school activities as a member of a group, and think about their own futures. The person leading these activities is the class teacher (known in senior high schools as the homeroom teacher). Class teachers are chosen by the principal/headmaster from among regular teachers, who each teach their own curriculum subject, and most class teachers work hard to ensure they create a relationship of trust with the students in their class. It is usual for such teachers to refer to the students in their class as "my students" or even "my children." Emotionally, they are truly "in loco parentis" for these students. The class teacher is aware of the home situation and living environment of each student in their class, and for this reason the class teacher is given responsibility for providing career counseling to students during lunch breaks and outside of school hours.

To understand part of the background of the class teacher system, which extends into senior high school, we need to look at the entrance examination system for senior high schools. 98% of junior high school graduates move on to senior high school, and each senior high school has its own entrance examination process, which students have to pass in order to be given a place at the school.<sup>1</sup> More than 70% of Japanese senior high school

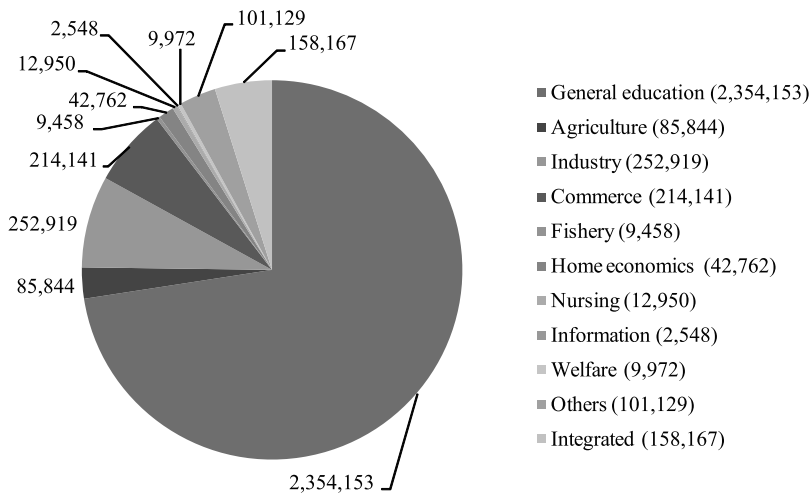
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<sup>1</sup> The actual process of selection of students for entry to public senior high schools differs from prefecture to prefecture. In general, students who do not pass the entrance examination for public full-time senior high schools have the following options: (i) to take the entrance examination for a private high school, (ii) to take the entrance examination for any public high school implementing second-stage selection procedures, (iii) to take the entrance examination for entry to a part-time or



Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, *School Basic Survey Preliminary Report FY 2010*, table 16.

Figure 1. Number of Full-Time Senior High Schools by Course (2010)



Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, *School Basic Survey Preliminary Report FY 2010*, table 16.

Figure 2. Number of Full-Time Senior High School Students by Course (2010)

students are taught non-vocational, basically academic subjects at general education course (Figures 1 and 2), but there is a significant range in both quality, content and standards between schools, even those classed as providing a “general” curriculum. Each prefecture has a small number of senior high schools where the highest achievers will gather (the tip of the

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correspondence course-based senior high school or (iv) to take a year “out” and prepare for re-examination in the following year.

pyramid), while more academically disadvantaged students will largely attend schools in the middle or lower part of the pyramid. In other words, as a result of entrance examinations, each school will be populated by students with similar levels of academic achievement, which enables the school to place students in the same year into classes of around 40 people, and teach the same curriculum to each class unit.

This type of senior high school entrance examination system is a huge event for junior high school students. Most students face their first public selection examination at the point where they enter senior high school, and whether or not they succeed at this examination can have a not insignificant effect on their future lives. The Japanese culture of judging people by their academic qualifications (or by the history of their school), which has for so long been the basis of employment practice, has ensured that no one doubts the value of climbing as high up the pyramid as is possible. Various evidences show that this so-called “academic qualification-based society” has loosened its hold in recent years, but parents of junior high school students still hope to see their children enter high-level high schools if at all possible, and the entrance examinations therefore remain to be a major source of worry for the students. Of course, even now, the entrance examinations continue to be one of the most serious concerns for the class teachers at the junior high schools as well, since they have the responsibility to support their students’ career formation.

This paper will therefore set out the current state of, and issues relating to, the promotion of strategies for career education in Japan, based on the assumptions given above associated with the particular features of the Japanese education system.

Around 30 years ago, during the time when Japan was experiencing extraordinary economic growth, the Japanese education system was the focus of admiration all around the world, as one of the factors supporting the growth. The problems now faced by the Japanese economy today have the potential to threaten global economic recovery (as pointed out by Tasker [2010]), and it is no longer true that the world praises Japanese education—least of all its career education. A Russian proverb, however, says “The darker the night, the brighter the stars shine, lighting up a path to the future.” With Japan in its current difficult economic state, the country is now working towards revitalizing career formation support for the children who will have to support its future. Firstly, let us take a look at how this is occurring.

## **II. Proposal and Reasons for Career Education in Japan**

### **1. The Appearance of the New Term “Career Education”**

An awareness of the need to promote “career education” as a policy matter arose within Japan no more than 10 years ago. To be more accurate, in December 1999, the Central Educational Council,<sup>2</sup> the Education Minister’s consultative agency, published a report

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<sup>2</sup> Currently the consultative agency to the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and

entitled “Improvements in Articulation between Elementary and Secondary Schools, and Higher Education Institutions.” This report contained the following points.

There is a need to implement career education from the elementary school level, in line with each stage of a child’s development, in order to provide smooth transitions between school and society, and between different levels of schooling. (This education should help students to gain a desirable perspective of employment and work, as well as knowledge and skills related to work itself, and at the same time, encourage them to understand their own personalities so as to foster their abilities and attitudes and allow them to select their own careers independently.) Families and regional community should work in partnership with schools to implement career education, and the focus should be on experience-based learning. Each school should establish targets, and ensure that the education is implemented in a planned way as part of the curriculum. It is also important that the implementation status and results are consistently evaluated.

The focus of this report is, as the report’s title suggests, “Improvements in Articulation between Elementary and Secondary Schools, and Higher Education Institutions” and the following points are made in explaining the “perspectives for consideration” that underpin the report.

During the period of high economic growth, university entrance rate rose, and against this background of high demand for postsecondary education, a situation occurred in which many children and parents were subjected to “excessive entrance examination competition.” This situation continued subsequent to date. Before the Second World War, only a few students were subject to “entrance examination competition,” but this became a problem for far more Japanese nationals with the post-war increase to the rate of university entrance. [text omitted] Japan has a strong awareness of horizontal equality, but once a majority of people of the same generation began to proceed into higher education institutions of some form or another, there is inevitably the possibility that increasing numbers of students will be unable to progress to tertiary education based on their own objective selection. If steps are not taken to change the current attitude of “if everyone else is going (to university) then I’ll go too,” there is the possibility that objective decisions regarding students’ futures, based on their individual abilities, aptitude, eagerness and interests may not be sufficiently implemented.

Today, three quarters of all students leaving senior high schools proceed to higher or further education institutions, but there are indications of an increasing danger that fewer

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Technology. The Minister has several consultative bodies, but the Central Education Council is responsible for the most comprehensive considerations regarding education.

and fewer people progress into such institutions with any firm objective or sense of choice. The career education proposed in this report does not simply focus on the process of moving from school to employment, it also includes issues relating to the transition between compulsory education and senior high school, and from senior high school to university or other higher education institution. In contrast to Europe and the USA, where there is a strong trend towards recommending the enrollments in colleges and universities in order to ensure future employment stability, a particular feature of Japan's approach is the desire to correct the current situation whereby students have an attitude of merely "going with the flow" in regard to their progress, along with their peers, into higher education.<sup>3</sup>

Despite taking the tone described above, the report does push for greater interest to be taken in the transition from school to work. The reason for proposing career education that includes the important element of "education to help students to gain a desirable perspective of employment and work, as well as knowledge and skills relating to work itself" appears to lie in the increasing number of young people out of work, and those who spend their time on part-time, mostly unskilled work, who are known in Japan as "Freeters."<sup>4</sup> The report points out the following in regard to this:

An increasing number of new school graduates show an interest in becoming "Freeters," and currently around 9% of senior high school graduates clearly leave school without progressing to higher education or entering employment. In addition, according to a survey by the Ministry of Labour,<sup>5</sup> 47% of new senior high school graduates and 32% of new university graduates leave their employment situation within three years. This phenomenon is profoundly related to changes in both the economic situation and the labor market, and as such is a difficult problem to assess, but it is certain that there are outstanding issues in connecting school education and working life.

The reason why part-time work and a high frequency of job changing is a problem for young people is the fact that in a country that bases its employment practices on lifetime

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<sup>3</sup> In fiscal 2009, 98.2% of junior high school graduates moved on to senior high school, and the drop-out rate from senior high school during the same year was 1.7%. Furthermore, 54.3% of senior high school graduates moved onto higher education (university or junior college), with a further 23.0% moving on to continuing education (vocational colleges or public employment skills development facilities) (MEXT, 2010). As of 2008, an international comparison of educational attainment among adult populations revealed that 43% of Japanese people have completed tertiary education, significantly ahead of the OECD member country average (28%) (OECD 2010, table A1.1a).

<sup>4</sup> "Freeter" is a made-up Japanese word, created in 1987 by Hiroshi Michishita, editor of a classified employment advertising magazine by mixing the terms "freelance" and "Arbeiter" (the German term for worker). The German term "Arbeit" has been used for around a century by students as a kind of "in" term to describe part-time jobs taken while at university. Nowadays it is used as a general term for part-time work done by young people. This is the background to the wide adoption of the newly-coined term "Freeter."

<sup>5</sup> Currently the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

employment, such practices can lead to social disadvantage. The immobility of workers is so deeply entrenched in Japan that it could even be described as a part of the country's culture (Fujita 2006). In other words, young people who transfer between multiple part time jobs, or who, despite being hired as full employees, leave their jobs within a short period of time, risk being labeled as unreliable or lacking social common sense by mainstream society, which sees immobility as a given. Such young people risk being stuck in unstable, low-paid employment even at their post-adolescent life (Hori 2007). Furthermore, the premise of immobility has led to Public Employment Security Offices commissioning a certain part of their work to senior high schools, with the schools undertaking the job placement functions for their students. Since this system ensures full-time students moving immediately to full-time permanent work as regular employees, the fact that increasing numbers of students do not benefit from this system is beginning to be acknowledged as a social problem.

The situation in the USA is in stark comparison to that of Japan. American young people experience a wide range of short-term activities between leaving schools and obtaining full-time permanent positions. They may participate in vocational skill training programs that promote employment, be temporarily unemployed or lose their jobs, return to student status, take part time jobs, or be employed full-time for short periods of time (OECD 2000). This sort of "milling and churning" is all considered experience that will count in the process of becoming regularly employed, and is understood as completely normal path to the adulthood. For this reason, there have been various debates regarding the creation and operation of support programs for young people engaged in insecure work, or those who are out of work.

In Japan, on the other hand, since it has always been assumed that young people will move from full-time study directly to full-time work, there has never been, and still is not, a particularly developed support system for young people who take any other path. Career education could be said to have emerged under a burden of need to prevent such "deviant behavior."

## 2. Another Reason for Creating a New Term: The Functional Failure of "Career Guidance"

It is, however, not the case that there was absolutely no guidance or support for students leaving school and entering employment (or progressing to higher level of education) prior to the emergence of career education in Japan. The concept of "vocational guidance (*shokugyo-shido*)" was first proposed in the early 1900s. This was changed to the term "career guidance (*shinro-shido*)" in the 1960s. Such guidance practices were considered to be a part of school education from the early period. Despite the various reforms implemented to the system, however, the career guidance practices based on the authentic principles never have taken root in schools in Japan. The main reasons for this are given below.

### (1) American Roots and Japanese Culture

The primary reason why career guidance failed to function appears to be that its principles were based in ideas imported directly from the USA, and were not subject to any sort of localization.

The term “vocational guidance” is said to have been first introduced into Japan in 1915 by Munetoshi Irisawa, based on the principles of vocational guidance carried out in the USA, and translated directly into the Japanese term *shokugyo-shido*. Directly after the Second World War, in 1947, when the first national curriculum guidelines were defined, the term “vocational guidance” was included, based on a translation of the definition adopted by the American National Vocational Guidance Association in 1937.

Subsequently, theories of career development proposed by Eli Ginzberg and Donald E. Super were highly influential in developing Japanese career guidance policies. The self-realization theories of Abraham H. Maslow and Carl R. Rogers and the federal government's Career Education Movement of the 1970s were introduced at an early stage into Japan, and garnered significant attention.

The principles and philosophies that made up the basis for Japanese career guidance could be said to have developed from the principles and theories brought over from America. Insufficient attention, however, was paid to the particular features of Japanese education and human resources practices, which were based on lifetime employment systems—for example, the simultaneous en-masse recruiting of new school graduates, the system of firm-wide on-the-job training subsequent to employment, and the periodic transfer of employees within companies. In addition, there was almost no debate regarding the differences between Japan and the USA in terms of social practices based on gender roles and social awareness of such, typified by the role of full-time housewives in both countries.

Sowing the seeds of American ideas, and attempting to develop these processes within Japanese social practice without any perceptible improvement or adjustment, may well have led to some subsequent problems with realizing functional career guidance.

### (2) The Impact of Entrance Examination Competition

The second reason why career guidance did not function sufficiently in Japan lies in the impact of the country's deeply-rooted academic qualification-based society, and specifically, in the tough entrance examination competition faced by Japanese students aiming to progress to more highly-regarded senior high schools and universities.

As noted above, many companies periodically transfer their full-time workers, especially white-collar workers, to different sections/departments, and offer continuous on-the-job training. Most companies hire solely new graduates without any professional experiences or skills, and train them from scratch. The trainability has been the key factor which enables a jobseeker to secure a position. Graduates from well-known universities, who are highly competitive to be enrolled, have a great advantage in the job-hunting race. Top-ranking university students are considered to have stronger trainability because of the



fact that they passed the entrance examinations at least twice: once somewhere at K-12 level, most often at senior high school level, and the second time at university level (Ishida 1982; Byham 1993; Dore and Sako 1998). Companies saw the skills acquired in this range of entrance examinations—balanced consideration, memory skills, and the ability to bear the pressures of tough examination study, as demonstrating skills that can be utilized in a range of different company departments, and as such they welcomed these abilities.

Against this background, large numbers of parents tried to get their children into competitive schools, and demonstrated a lack of interest in career guidance, since they did not consider it would help them to create a promising future career plan. The more famous companies and larger companies are particularly prone to transferring their employees between departments, and for this reason it did not matter to them whether or not students had an individual career plan. Rather, they would prefer it if employees simply gave them free range to do as they wished, without having a particular desire to become one thing or another. During junior high school, students merely thought about getting into senior high school, and during senior high school, they thought only about entering university. Beyond this, they rarely held opinions about what they wanted to do. Since the majority of students were in this mold, parents tended to think this was the norm.

Furthermore, the assessment of senior high schools within society is decided by the proportion of students that they send to well-known universities. Evaluation of class teachers in third year classes at junior high schools is also largely dependent on how many students in their classes pass examinations for competitive senior high schools. For this reason, many teachers are passionate about getting their top-year students through entrance examinations, but few of them spend any time in assisting their students to consider their lives of post-graduation and compare that life to the realities that exist within society.

### (3) The Ironic Results of Relaxing Entrance Examination Competition

The tough entrance examination competition described above was subject to guidance by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) that attempted to rectify the situation from the 1960s onwards, but in reality, the situation in regard to entrance examination competition, which was so tightly bound up with employment practices, was never truly relaxed. Against this background the Ministry of Education took the decision to make some significant policy changes in regard to junior high schools in 1993.

Until this point, the majority of junior high schools participated in mock examinations implemented simultaneously throughout the prefecture in which they were situated. These tests were created by specialist private-sector companies, and on test dates, schools cancelled all regular classes and implemented the applicable tests instead. In the final year of junior high school, for example, it would be normal for this sort of mock examinations to be implemented several times—perhaps up to 10 times—per year. The test results would be marked by the companies in question, using a system which ranked each of the core sub-

jects (those required in entrance examinations) according to their position within the prefecture, as well as clarifying deviation scores. Japan has public elementary and junior high schools established in each of its local municipal boards of education, but senior high schools are established by the prefectural boards, and as such entrance to senior high schools involves competition beyond the boundaries of one's home town. For this reason, the prefecture-wide mock examinations are an extremely important resource, used to predict a student's achievement level or otherwise to pass future entrance examinations for senior high schools. Moreover, in some cases, junior high schools report the results of such examinations to senior high schools to be used as the de-facto criteria to select in-coming students.

The Ministry of Education, however, issued a circular notice prohibiting all public junior high schools to participate in this kind of mock examinations. The purpose of doing this was to improve the distortion created by spending so much time preparing for such mock examinations, which resulted in students losing track of the essence of learning, and to facilitate them in making decisions regarding their progress after graduation, through acquiring basic abilities and competence, and the passions and interests to plan their futures. The following is a quote from the notification in question:

The selection of students for entry to senior high schools should be done based on resources appropriate for public education, and the selection of students using the results of private-sector tests should not be allowed.

Furthermore, career guidance in junior high schools should be implemented in an integrated way, through day-to-day study results and activities, based on students' abilities, competencies, and interests, and career guidance should not be offered dependent on deviation scores etc. resulting from private-sector testing.

This move, however, did not achieve the anticipated results. Junior high schools did stop using private-sector testing, but in place of junior high schools, private cram schools went into partnerships with the testing companies, and students continued to undertake mock examinations as before. For many children, this meant that they were still able to obtain resources that allowed them to judge their position within the prefecture, and their achievement level to pass or otherwise senior high school entrance examinations. Junior high schools, who had lost the way to implement the mock examinations that were so highly trusted by students and their parents, tried to respond by implementing a new type of in-school testing, but obviously these were not as convincing as the mock tests, which allowed participants to obtain prefectural data.

Subsequently, after receiving strong guidance from the Ministry of Education, junior high schools began gradually to implement the sort of career guidance that had originally been required. As indicated above, however, it did not solve the problem of the lack of consistency between the principles of career guidance and Japanese social norms, including employment practices. In other words, while there was a need to implement career guidance

that allowed each student to create a career plan that fits with the realities of society, and work at verifying the possibility of realizing such a plan, no framework or theory had been developed as a basis for the implementation of this. In addition, the reality was that most teachers were engaging in career guidance without the sufficient cooperation of specialists or external organizations, meaning that effectively, career guidance was being implemented in such a way as to have little connection to the realities of society. For example, inventories on personality, interest and work compatibility, all of which can be done within the classroom, are widely utilized, and teachers often ask their students to write essays regarding their dreams for the future, which are read out to the class as a whole, but there is a lack of accompanying activities that may provide a reality check by comparing these “dreams” to the realities within society. As a result, even teachers have gone on record as saying that career guidance is too weighted towards focusing on the individual dreams and personalities of the children, and not sufficiently connected to reality (Shimomura 2004).

### **III. Reforms Brought about by Career Education**

The proposal by the Central Educational Council regarding the promotion of career education includes some preventive measures that relate to the increasing number of young people who are removed from conventional mainstream assumptions (i.e. the idea that they will move directly from full-time education to full-time work), but it also sought to generate improvements in regard to the issues created by career guidance described above.

Subsequently, however, with the stagnation of Japan’s economy, employment prospects for young people have worsened. Career education promotion strategies have developed as if in response to this situation. For example, in 2002, the National Institute for Educational Policy Research released a research report entitled “Promoting Education to Develop a Perspective regarding Employment and Work among Students,” and in 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), along with the Ministry of Health, Labour, Welfare, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Cabinet Office, published the “Youth Independence and Challenge Plan,” a comprehensive human resources scheme that aims to strengthen education, employment and industrial strategies. Subsequently, in 2004, the “Integrated Cooperative Research Committee on the Promotion of Career Education,” which was established within MEXT, published a report entitled “Educating Students to Develop an Individual Perspective regarding Employment and Work,” among other measures that were implemented at short notice in order to promote career education.

Now, let us focus on the detailed strategies taken by MEXT to promote career education, to bring the reform trends in light particularly at the elementary and secondary school level.

## 1. Initial Budget Setting

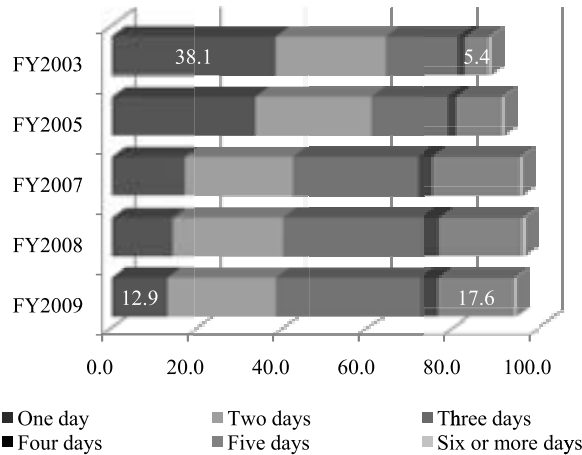
MEXT first allocated a budget to specific promotion measures for school-based career education in fiscal 2004. At this time, 140 million yen was allocated to (i) the establishment of an Internship Links Council (national council), (ii) the implementation of a Career Education Promotion Forum (in two locations nationwide) and (iii) the definition of career education promotion areas (definition of a unified career education program for elementary, junior and senior high schools [one area per prefecture]). MEXT explained the thinking behind the budgets as follows:

The diversification and increased flexibility of employment practices that has taken place with recent changes to the structure of both industry and the economy, along with an increased demand for better academic qualifications, a less clear perspective on work and careers, and the rise of the “Freeter,” all contribute to a worsening awareness regarding career progress and objectives among all students—whether they are graduating from junior or senior high school, or in fact university—and the problem that increasing numbers of young people are entering further education or work without really considering where it will lead. In order to deal with this situation, and to provide integrated human resources training through strengthening links between education, employment and industry policy, the “Youth Independence and Challenge Plan” has been compiled by four government agencies, including MEXT, requiring the promotion of career education at every stage of a child's development, from elementary school onwards.

While mentioning the “diversification and increased flexibility of employment practices that has taken place with recent changes to the structure of both industry and the economy,” it is notable that the report focuses on the more serious problems in awareness and recognition among students, caused by an increased demand for better academic qualifications, a less clear perspective on work and careers, and the rise of the “Freeter,” along with a worsening awareness of objectives in regard to further education and/or employment. Rather than working out a specific national strategy to deal with this, the government's response has been to provide seed money so that society as a whole aims to increase momentum behind the promotion of career education and the sharing of information at prefectural level.

## 2. Proposal and Rollout of “Career Start Week”

During 2005, however, MEXT began to formulate far more specific policies with the aim of rolling out career education. A nationwide campaign was rolled out with a strong emphasis on a five-day work experience program at junior high schools. This program continued until fiscal 2008. For this purpose, a budget of 460 million yen was allocated during fiscal 2005, and over the four years of its implementation, the project was funded to a total of more than 1.1 billion yen.



Source: National Institute for Education Policy Research (2010), *Results of Survey into the State of Work Experience and Internship Implementation during Fiscal 2009*.

Figure 3. Rates of Implementation of Work Experience Activities  
(by number of days implemented)

The impact of this campaign, which was allocated such an enormous budget, was enormous. As shown in Figure 3, work experience activities in junior high schools were increasing, both in the extent of implementation and the number of days used.<sup>6</sup>

First of all, we should look at the excellent results achieved by this campaign. Prior to the proposal of Career Start Week, almost 90% of all junior high schools already implemented some sort of career experience program, but around 40% only offered the program for a single day. One-day implementation did not produce the anticipated results. Firstly, this was not significantly different to the workplace visits implemented broadly across elementary schools. Secondly, the more cooperative the workplace to school visits, the more likely they were to try to create an enjoyable experience for the children—one that would remain in their memories for a long time—resulting in them treating the children as guests and entertaining them. If the students were visiting a bakery, for example, the staff may prepare Danish pastry dough, and prepare the bread right to the last stages, so that when the children arrived they were given egg to wash onto the top of the bread, dark cherry compote to place inside the pastry, etc., and effectively given only a small “experience” of baking, before being offered the finished product to taste. The students would write in their reports that “we made our own Danish pastries and they were delicious,” but they had not in fact made anything at all, and had hardly touched upon experiencing the day-to-day real work of

<sup>6</sup> The decline in the implementation rate in FY2009 was mostly due to temporary closing of schools and suspension of activities caused by the outbreak of H1N1 swine flu.

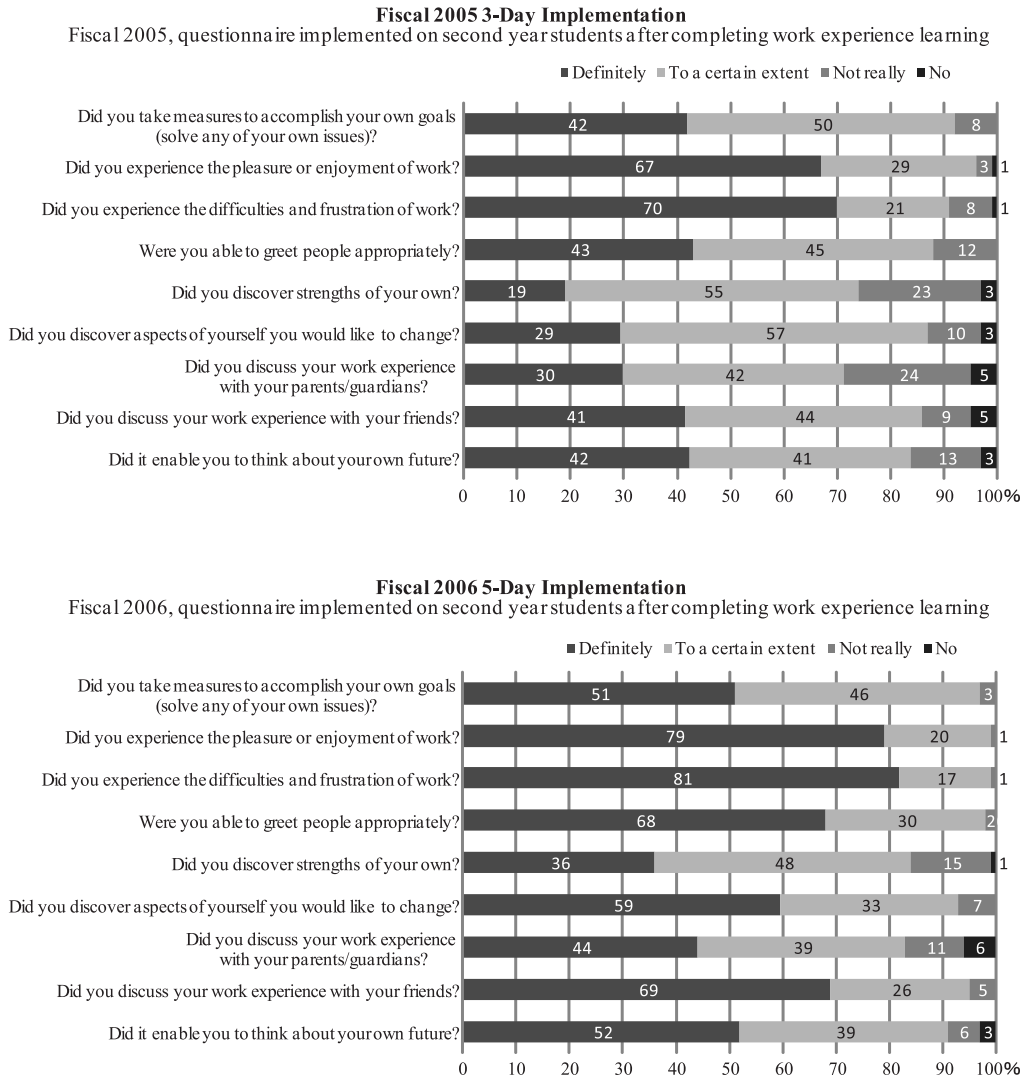
a baker. Thirdly, and in complete contrast, there were some cases reported where businesses took the line that “since they are only here for a single day,” the children should only be shown the most peripheral aspects of work. For example, cases were reported of children who visited a wholesale fish market, or an old people's home, but the only “experience” they were given was that of weeding the outdoor garden.

Within only a few years of this situation occurring, the fact that the new program raised the number of three-day or longer work experiences to around 60%, and the number that lasted for five days or longer to close to 20%, should be acknowledged for the success it represents. The fact that this allowed students to experience the day-to-day running of a workplace at first hand—even if they only saw part of what was done—meant that they experienced something that contributed to their internal development, and as such, the increase in the number of days involved in the project was significant (Figure 4).

The fact that this project offered a significant opportunity to change the content of career education as it had been implemented to date—lacking reality and being mainly classroom-based—into something based on social experience, should be viewed in a positive light. If this MEXT-devised campaign had not been implemented, there may well have been no improvement in the rate of implementation of, or the number of days used in, work experience programs.

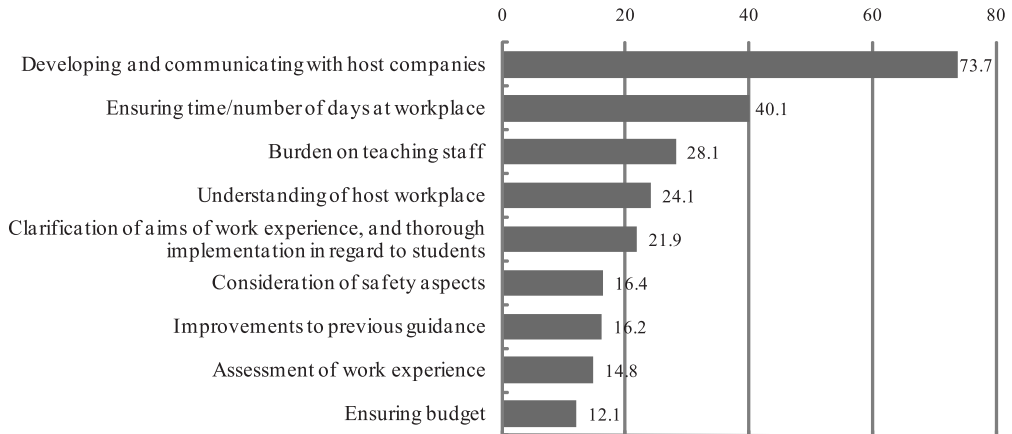
On the other hand, there were several negative aspects to this campaign. The first one lies in the fact that MEXT invested a large amount of money into budgeting for a national program of work experience activities, which could be said to have encouraged the misunderstanding that the fundamental aspect of career education was the implementation of work experiences. Put another way, the strong demand for tangible outputs in the form of work experience caused a tendency to ignore the debate regarding what outcomes were in fact vital in career education. Work experience was implemented against a less-than-clear understanding of why it was being done, and many people pointed out that it had not been rolled out as a sufficiently systematic project (Osaka Prefectural Board of Education 2005; Expert Conference on Career Education/Council of Directors in Government Departments Involved in Promoting Career Education 2007; General Education Center of Iwate Prefecture 2008). It is still the case that many junior high schools consider they have met the requirements of implementing career education if they have taken part in one of the work experience programs promoted so strongly by MEXT and the prefectural education committees.

Furthermore, since the responsibility for policies regarding the promotion of partnerships with external (non-school) organizations was given to each school, the significant problem arose of ensuring that sufficient companies, etc., were recruited to implement work experience (Figure 5), while it has also been pointed out that without specific support from the state, the creation of partnerships by individual cities, towns and villages, which has been indicated as required in the future, will be impossible (Komikawa 2007).



Source: Re-compiled from data included in Niigata Prefectural Education Council (2009), *Towards Career Education that Allows Niigata's Children to Realize Their Dreams—Measures Taken as Part of Niigata Prefecture Career Start Week, Fiscal 2008*.

Figure 4. Results of Questionnaire Completed by Students of Johoku Junior High School, Joetsu City, Niigata Prefecture, Regarding Their Activities under Work Experience Programs (comparison of three-day experience [fiscal 2005] and five-day experience [fiscal 2006])



Source: National Institute for Educational Policy Research (2004), *Survey to Understand the State of Work Experience/Internships*.

Figure 5. Issues Relating to Work Experience Activities, as Indicated by Junior High School Teachers

### 3. The Impact of Defining the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education

In 2008, career education was given a further boost through the cabinet resolution adopting the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education,<sup>7</sup> which announced that career education would be promoted as one of several “strategies to be implemented in an integrated and planned manner over the next five years.”

Promote career education from the elementary school level, through partnerships with related government departments and the cooperation of economic bodies, PTAs, non-profit organizations, etc., to develop children’s views of work and society, in order to equip them with self-awareness in regard to their future careers and life paths. In particular, promote work experience programs within junior high schools, and career education within senior high schools that solely offer general education course.

The Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, which passed through the official process of cabinet decision, raised the promotion of career education from the elementary school level, implemented in partnership with the offices and departments of central government, as a major issue. In addition, the highlighting of “work experience programs with-

<sup>7</sup> The Basic Act on Education was given its first full post-war revision in 2006, which led to the definition of the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education. The Basic Act on Education is the most important law in Japan relating to education, and as its name suggests, defines the basic tenets of education. Article 2, paragraph (1) (Objectives of Education) of the Basic Act on Education includes the phrase “foster an attitude to value labor while emphasizing the connections with careers and practical life.” This emphasis on careers was added for the first time to the Act during the 2006 revision.



in junior high schools” and “career education within senior high schools that solely offer general education course” has come to have a significant impact on subsequent career education.

#### (1) Subsequent Promotion of Career Education in Senior High Schools

As has already been stated, the abolition of private-sector tests by junior high schools in 1993 led to some significant reforms, and the Career Start Week, which began in 2005, also played a central role in promoting career education at junior high schools.

There were, however, no specific developments in regard to the promotion of career education policy within senior high schools, and compared with junior high schools, the level of career education implementation has remained insufficient. There are significant differences in the level of senior high school student participation in internships,<sup>8</sup> and in the length of such internships, when compared to the work experience activities provided in junior high schools (Figures 6 and 7). There is, in particular, a significant delay in implementing career education in regard to general education course, in which 70% or more of senior high school students are enrolled and accordingly, the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education clearly demanded the improvement of the situation. In fiscal 2008, MEXT supplied a budget for pilot studies in relation to career education promotion at senior high schools in each prefecture, and subsequently pressed ahead with plans to create specific strategies to promote career education in senior high schools, based on the results of these pilot studies, which were to be reported in 2010.

In this regard, the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education clearly demanded for improvement of the situation.

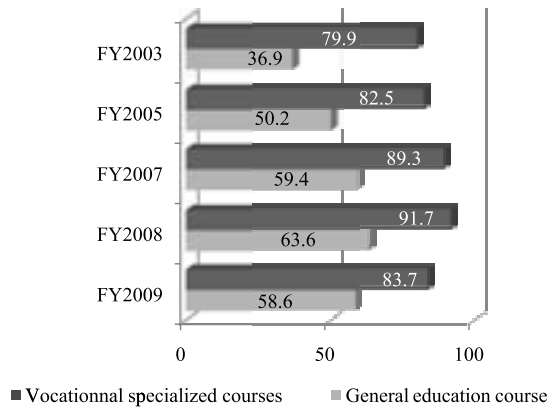
#### (2) Startup of Central Education Council’s “Task Force on Career Education and Vocational Education”

The impact of the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education was not limited to that already described. As a result of the reforms introduced by the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, the Central Education Council established a “Task Force on Career Education and Vocational Education.” The Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology allocated the following two topics of consideration to the Task Force:

Firstly, to clarify the basic and versatile competencies required for students from elementary and secondary schools through higher education in order to make a smooth transition into society and work, and to consider a full strategy of systematic career education with guaranteed quality, that facilitates verifiable training in line with each level of their development.

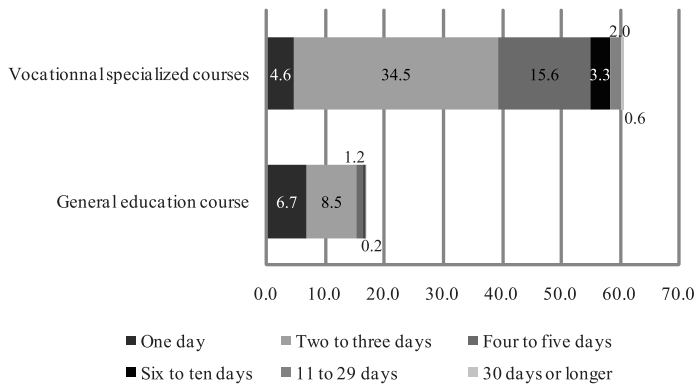
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<sup>8</sup> Junior high school work experience programs are generally implemented with the participation of all students in the target year, but senior high school internships may only apply to students studying certain majors, or students who request participation.



Source: National Institute for Educational Policy Research (2010), *Results of Survey into the State of Implementation of Work Experience Programs and Internships, Fiscal 2009*.

Figure 6. Trends in Rate of Implementation of Internships in Senior High Schools (extracted results for general education course and vocational specialized courses only)



Source: National Institute for Educational Policy Research (2010), *Results of Survey into the State of Implementation of Work Experience Programs and Internships, Fiscal 2009*.

Figure 7. Rate of Participation in Internships by Senior High School Students (extracted results for general education course and vocational specialized courses only, FY 2009)

Secondly, to ensure the acquisition of professional and practical vocational knowledge and skills throughout the upper secondary through higher education.

The most important thing to notice here is the “full strategy of systematic career education” noted as part of the first issue. This is a significant change in awareness of issues

compared to 2004, when career education was first promoted and allocated a budget. In 2004, awareness of problems was limited to that of the perception of students, who were experiencing an increased demand for better academic qualifications, a less clear perspective on work and careers, and the rise of the “Freeter,” all of which contributed to a worsening awareness regarding career progress and objectives. In the new strategy, the central focus was shifted to the development of “the basic and versatile competencies required for students from elementary and secondary schools through higher education in order to make a smooth transition into society and work.” In other words, the competencies required for both social and career independence, and for life within society and employment, are defined, and career education is to be implemented working towards these goals, with improvements to be implemented based on the outcomes achieved through the establishment of a PDCA cycle.

The “Task Force on Career Education and Vocational Education” published its second Committee Report in May 2010, but its final report will not be available until the winter of 2010. At present, it is anticipated that the final version will be completed by January 2011 at the latest.

#### **IV. Future Tasks**

Around ten years have passed since 1999, when the Central Education Council pointed out “the need for career education to be implemented from the elementary school level, in line with each stage of a child’s development.” The main progress during this period has been as described above. During the decade, promotion strategies were developed in rapid-fire succession, and the term “career education” became widely spread, but there were still a mountain of remaining problems related to improvements in implementation. The main problems are those given below.

##### **1. Division of Roles between State and Regions: Which Way Forward?**

In terms of the promotion of career education by MEXT, November 2009 is likely to be remembered as something of a bolt out of the blue. The change of administration to a Democratic Party government led to a screening of 449 state projects, in attempts to correct the difficult financial situation the country was in. Specifically, the newly formed Government Revitalization Unit discussed the necessity or otherwise of each different project, in order to reach a decision on their future. A period of nine days was set for decisions regarding 449 projects. The discussions were broadcast live over the Internet, and decisions were reached at a rapid pace regarding reductions in wasteful spending.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This screening process was the focus of much debate by interested citizens. While most agreed that wasteful spending of public money must be reduced and appreciated the transparency created by open discussion, there was also criticism of the fact that the time allocated was so short that it could not possibly result in properly verified decisions.

As a result of this process, projects relating to career education were judged as “to be left to the decision of local authorities.” The decision stated that the state, in the form of MEXT, should not be responsible for promoting these strategies. Just as proposals were about to be put through to further promote career education in senior high schools, where it was acknowledged that developments had been insufficient to date, the need for further progress appeared to be denied.

At the same time, however, the Basic Plan for Promotion of Education, which had been passed by cabinet decision, stated the need for the promotion of “career education from the elementary school level, through partnerships with related government departments,” and in response to this, the Central Education Council's Task Force on Career Education and Vocational Education is still considering what strategies should be put in place by the state as a whole.

There is a need for serious debate in the future regarding the division of roles between state and local governments in regards to career education.

## 2. Creation of an Improved Implementation Framework: The Road Less Traveled

The Central Education Council's Task Force on Career Education and Vocational Education produced its Second Interim Report in May 2010, in which it stated that the reasons behind the lack of smooth transition between school and society/employment “are not restricted to problems within school education alone, but rather can be seen as structural problems that exist throughout society.” The report also states “merely placing the responsibility on our children and young people will not lead to a solution to this problem.” This comment is worth noting, since it represents a significant change in basic direction in regard to career education promotion strategies, which up until this point focused on the problems in awareness among children and young people, and attempted to effect changes in that area. The Interim Report views the situation as caused by structural problems throughout society, and points to issues with school education, stating “school education must overcome the issues relating to the transition between school and society, and respond to society's demands by ensuring that it is developing human resources who can be independent in society and employment, even as the social environment becomes more complex and diverse.”

Based on this statement, the Interim Report lists the following tasks with school education in regard to the promotion of career education in the future:

- (i) Preparation of clear strategic plan relating to career education in all schools
- (ii) Ensuring that career education is seen as part of the curriculum in all schools
- (iii) Developing wide-ranging and diverse interpersonal skills
- (iv) Promotion of understanding of social and economic structures
- (v) Effective utilization of experience-based learning activities
- (vi) A review of learning conditions and outcomes of career education, and implementation of improvements

Detailed discussion of these issues must be held off until the publication of the Cen-

tral Education Council's final Report, but it is certain that the creation of frameworks and systems to accomplish these tasks will be a serious issue for the future.

In terms of developing a systematic learning program for career education, for example, and positioning it within the curriculum, discussions must be held regarding who will implement this, in partnership with what organizations, when, and based on what theoretical background. When entering upon such discussions, the classroom-based or homeroom-based systems inseparable from Japanese schools must be taken strongly into account. The burden placed on class or homeroom teachers needs to be eased, and at the same time, a system that is consistent with the classroom-based system, which is so deeply rooted in Japanese elementary and secondary schools, should be developed.

This sort of debate has hardly been entered into in Japan to date. As stated in section II-1 of this paper, during the period of high economic growth that followed the Second World War, the need for debate itself was hardly acknowledged.

Based on the forthcoming Final Report from the Central Education Council, there will need to be a broad debate among all stakeholders, including not only national and local policymakers, but also school administrators, teachers and other school employees, parents and guardians, representatives of industry, specialists in youth employment, etc., regarding the sort of frameworks that require building, and how to maintain a balance between national guidelines and local autonomy. Japan's career education is just about to embark on the road less—or perhaps never—traveled.

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