

Transformation and Persistence in Japanese Youth Labor Market

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This paper looks back on youth labor from a long-term perspective, focusing on the transformation of the youth labor market that became apparent in the 1990s, and examines the current status and challenges faced. Youth employment policies initiated around 2000 have provided support for young people in precarious employment, such as facilitating the transition of non-regular employees to regular status and implementing measures for unemployed young people at the local level.

While efforts have been made to enhance the functionality of the labor market—through measures such as strengthening cooperation between schools and *Hello Work*, expanding new graduate recruitment categories to include previous graduates, and improving information-sharing systems for job seekers and employers—the fundamental framework of the “Japanese-style” transition, characterized by simultaneous recruiting of new graduates, has not undergone significant transformation. Amid a decline in the number of high school graduates due to the low birthrate and the growing share of university and specialized training college entrants, the employment rate of new graduates, especially among female new graduates from specialized training colleges and universities, has been recovering. Although labor demand for regular employees is also recovering, there has been no significant change in the tendency of young people to leave their jobs in early stages, with 30% of new graduates quitting their jobs within the first three years of employment. Low income and poor working conditions are the main reasons for young regular employees leaving their jobs, and the percentage of these reasons has been increasing among young female workers in particular. The share of non-regular employment has been slightly increasing among young male workers and shrinking among young female workers. Among young people, there has been no increase in the share of those changing from non-regular employment to regular employment, and the rate of unemployment among young people has increased slightly. According to the classification in this paper, there was no indication that while the number of middle-aged and older workers in regular employment is increasing, the share of regular employees among young people is declining. In changing youth labor circumstances, we must reexamine the explanation of youth labor formed during the “ice-age” of youth employment and consider wage disparity depending on employment status and self-reliance support with income security.

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I. Introduction

In Japan, many companies recruit new graduates annually based on educational attainment. Students engage in job hunting while in school and join companies simultaneously upon graduation. This system of simultaneous recruitment of new graduates, along with “school-mediated employment,” where high schools assist students in finding jobs (Honda 2005), has been regarded as a strength of Japan’s youth labor market (Müller and Shavit 1998). This recruitment system is incorporated in the Japanese employment system. Young workers are assigned to entry-level jobs generated as a result of mandatory retirement or personnel transfer of experienced workers, developing their skills through in-house training premised on long-term employment. Thelen (2014) sorted out the characteristics of skills development in advanced countries, with public involvement and involvement of firms in education and training as two axes, as shown in Table 1. In this analysis, Japan is positioned as a “segmentalist” system, defined by a high proportion of corporate training for its own employees and a low proportion of public involvement in vocational training for workers. Amid the economic downturn following the bubble burst, there was a 180-degree shift in the evaluation of the Japanese model of school-to-work transition—which is characterized by simultaneous recruitment of new graduates and company-led skills development. Research revealed that: the concentration of favorable job opportunities at the time of graduation negatively impacts generations entering the workforce during recessions; the conventional employment practices may cause a mismatch between students and companies; and non-regular workers suffer from low wages, limited training opportunities, and difficulties in transitioning to regular employment.

Youth labor has remained one of the central themes in labor research and labor policy since around 2000. During this period, various measures have been implemented for young people in non-regular employment and those unemployed, and attempts have been made to review the practices and rules governing employment of high school and university graduates. Meanwhile, amid the decline in youth population due to the low birthrate, the career paths of high school graduates have changed, and those seeking higher educational attainment have

Table 1. Types of vocational education and training systems

		Involvement of firms in initial vocational education and training	
		Low	High
Public commitment to vocational education and training	High	Collectivism, state-based Finland, Norway, Sweden, France	Collectivism, firm-sponsored Germany, Austria, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Denmark
	Low	Liberal United States, UK	Segmentalist Japan

Source: Thelen (2014: 72).

been increasing. The demographic shifts have prompted a review of Japan's traditional social structures, leading to the promotion of continued employment of older workers and women. The employment situation has also improved now, with demand for regular employees increasing. Against this backdrop of changing circumstances and environments for young people, this paper aims to provide a broad historical overview of youth labor and examine the current status and challenges. Section II outlines the institutional framework for new graduate employment and the development of youth employment policies to ascertain changes in post-graduation pathways of high school graduates and the employment situation of new graduates. Section III examines trends in labor demand and identifies changes in early job separation and reasons for leaving jobs among young people. Section IV reviews changes in the share of non-regular employment among young people and their transition to regular employment, and trends in youth unemployment. Section V considers whether the share of regular employees among young people is declining as more older workers remain in employment. Section VI, based on these analyses, explores perspectives for the future study of youth labor.

II. Current state of the Japanese model of school-to-work transition

1. Institutional framework for employment of high school and university graduates

This section explains the institutional framework of the new graduate labor market, outlines the development of youth employment policies implemented since around 2000, and provides an overview of changes in post-graduation pathways and employment situations of young people.

A key feature of the transition from high school to work is the involvement of labor administration and high schools in matching between students and jobs. This mechanism can be explained as follows, taking the March 2024 graduates as an example. Companies submit job postings to *Hello Work* (public employment security offices), and companies submit postings checked by *Hello Work* offices for students to their high schools. High schools provide employment guidance to students and recommend job seekers to the companies they have applied to. Subsequently, companies conduct employment examinations for students recommended by the schools.¹ Academic focus has been placed on the “performance-based relationship” between high schools and companies within this mechanism. According to Kariya (1991), a performance-based relationship is a “network within an ongoing transactional relationship between schools and companies, aiming to stabilize employment, recruitment, and job placement through the exchange of highly reliable information based on trust,... a relationship governed by norms where one party controls the actions of the other within the continuity of the relationship.” Performance-based relationships are associated with employment practices such as the designated school system where companies post job openings only at specific high schools, school-based selection emphasizing academic performance of students, and school recommendations under the one-company-per-student system. It was argued that the approach of “vocational selection entrusted to schools” with these elements extended educational meritocracy to non-elites, forming the high-quality workforce that underpinned Japan's industrial society.

However, “vocational selection entrusted to schools” taking place in high schools became a target of criticism in the early 2000s amid the worsening employment situation (Hori 2016). The “Final Report: A Research on Transition of High School Graduates to Working Life,” published jointly by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) in 2002, highlighted the awareness of the issue as follows: “The system for arranging employment for high school graduates, based on trust between high schools and companies, which had been considered highly effective in matching a large number of job seekers with job offers within a short period, may now, due to changes in the socio-economic environment, be causing mismatch between students and jobs and increases in the number of unemployed young people and those working in part-time jobs (so-called ‘freeters’ [free + Arbeiter (German for ‘worker’)]) after graduation.”² As a result, improvement measures were proposed, such as relaxing the designated

school system through the sharing of job information, allowing students to make multiple job applications, and shifting the guidance approach to emphasize self-selection by students. Furthermore, the “High School Employment Issues Review Committee” for nationwide rule-making and the “Prefectural High School Employment Issues Review Committee” for regional discussions based on local circumstances were established.

While the policy direction shifted toward “liberalization,” it became clear that traditional employment practices persisted at schools (Hori 2016). The “Report of the Working Team of the High School Employment Issues Review Committee,” published jointly by the MEXT and the MHLW in 2020, also cited survey results indicating support for traditional practices, which suggests that the direction of “liberalization” was maintained but the previous awareness of the issue that attributed the cause of job mismatch to “vocational selection entrusted to schools” receded.³ Furthermore, according to Hori (2016), employment guidance at high schools in the 2010s varied depending on the department, number of graduates entering employment, and regional labor market, and within this context, “vocational selection entrusted to schools” was noted to be a minority approach.

A key characteristic of the transition from university to work, compared to high school graduate employment, is that direct applications submitted by students using job search sites have become the primary route for finding employment. As stipulated by the Employment Security Act, universities, as with high schools, may provide free employment placement services. Until a certain period after the war, the mainstream recruitment method for new university graduates was school recommendations or the designated school system. However, against the backdrop of rising labor demand for new university graduates, recruitment and job-seeking activities without university involvement expanded (Fukui 2016). The role of mediating between students and companies in university graduate employment is primarily filled by recruitment information providers,⁴ such as job search sites. As direct applications became more popular, companies and students began contacting each other using postcards contained in job information magazines. In 1996, *Recruit Book on the Net*, the predecessor of the current *Rikunabi*, launched its service, leading the provision of job vacancy and job seeker information via the internet to go mainstream (Fukui 2016; Kagawa 2020). According to the “Survey on the Start Time and Other Matters of Students’ Job Seeking and Recruitment Activities” conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2019, the most common route for fourth-year university students to join their companies was “direct application (entry via websites, etc.).”⁵

The schedule of new university graduates’ job-seeking and recruitment activities were determined by the Recruitment Agreement from 1952 to 1996, and by the Japan Business Federation’s (Keidanren’s) Charter of Corporate Ethics and Guidelines on Recruitment Selection and the Employment Issues Discussion Group’s agreement from 1997 to 2017. Following Keidanren’s announcement in 2018 to abolish its guidelines and a statement by the chairperson of the Employment Issues Discussion Group, the “Inter-Ministerial Liaison Conference on the Schedule for Job-Seeking and Recruitment Activities” was established under the Cabinet Secretariat. The schedule is now determined through the system where the government publishes the “Approach to Determining the Schedule for Job-Seeking and Recruitment Activities” for prospective graduates in each academic year. Following the abolition of the Recruitment Agreement in 1997, a policy initiative to promote internship was launched, and the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Labour jointly compiled the “Basic Approach to the Promotion of Internships” (hereinafter referred to as the “Tri-Ministerial Agreement”). As discussed later, in recent years, there has been demand for the active involvement of universities in internship programs, and these programs have been integrated into job-seeking and recruitment activities.

While the government does not directly intervene in labor supply and demand adjustments for new university graduates, it plays a complementary role by supporting young people who face difficulties in transition to work and facilitating job matching for new graduates. This point will be explained in the next section.

2. Development of youth employment policies

Youth employment policies started to be implemented at full scale around 2000, providing support for young people in non-regular employment, those unemployed, and those who left their regular jobs early. This section outlines the development of youth employment policies, separately for measures concerning non-regular employment and unemployment, and measures concerning the simultaneous recruitment of new graduates, to explore the current state of the institutional framework for the Japanese model of school-to-work transition.

In response to the worsening job offer situation for new high school graduates, the MHLW implemented the Emergency Support Program for Jobless Graduates in 2000. Collaborating with high schools and universities, it encouraged young people who failed to find a job after graduation to register as job seekers at *Hello Work* offices and provided individual support and assistance through the Youth Trial Employment Program.⁶ In 2003, the Young People's Independence and Challenge Strategy Council was established, under the initiative of the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, and Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy. The Youth Independence and Challenge Plan formulated by this council advocated measures such as promoting career education, establishing one-stop service centers for young people (Job Cafes), and creating a human resource development system through linkage between practical training and education (the Japanese dual system model). In 2007, the Job Card System was created based on the Growth Potential Enhancement Strategy, and this system remains in effect after undergoing review following the government's project screening. In 2012, Wakamono (Youth) *Hello Work* Centers were established in Tokyo, Aichi, and Osaka to support freeters in finding regular employment. Furthermore, subsidies for employers were introduced to promote the conversion of non-regular employees to regular status and to encourage skills development, including the creation of the Career Advancement Subsidy in FY2013. Most recently, in 2019, the "Support Program for the Employment Ice-Age Generation" was approved by the Cabinet. This program, launched in FY2020, aims to increase the number of regular employees in the employment ice-age generation by 300,000 over a three-year period.

For measures targeting unemployed young people, the School of Youth Independence (Wakamono Jiritsu Juku) project began in 2005, followed by the launch of the Regional Youth Support Stations in 2006. Within the Support Station program, young people facing difficulties in regular employment were identified and provided with opportunities for welfare-based employment and intermediate employment (Miyamoto 2017). Under the Self-Reliance Support System for Needy Persons, launched in 2015, intermediate employment was institutionalized as certified employment training within a framework of various support measures tailored to the individual's circumstances. In 2010, the Act on Promotion of Development and Support for Children and Young People was enacted, requiring local governments to establish Children and Youth Support Regional Councils as a mechanism for coordinating support for people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), those in social withdrawal (so-called "hikikomori"), and others across local agencies. As time passes, the current field of measures for unemployed young people has become a *brackish zone* where labor policy and welfare policy intersect. As indicated by the fact that the upper age limit for people eligible for Support Stations was raised from 40 to 50 in 2020, public employment support now covers middle-aged and older individuals.

Initiatives have been carried out with regard to the simultaneous recruitment of new graduates. What should be mentioned first includes the review of new graduate recruitment quotas and the advancement of collaboration between *Hello Work* offices and universities. In 2006, the Advisory Council on the "Challenge Again" Initiative was established, chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe. The "Interim Report: Building Systems Enabling People to Take on Challenging Situations Again," published in the same year, advocated "reforming society's overall systems to provide people with multiple tracks for working, learning, and living throughout life." Within this framework, the interim report proposed "reviewing the simultaneous recruitment system for new graduates" as part of the initiatives to diversify tracks for working, and explicitly pointed out the need to

encourage companies to raise hiring age limits and introduce multi-track hiring systems in order to provide employment opportunities to more people other than new graduates. The 2007 amendment to the Employment Measures Act introduced provisions concerning measures to ensure equal opportunity in recruitment and employment regardless of age, prohibiting the imposition of age limits. Furthermore, based on this Act, the “Guidelines for Appropriate Measures by Employers for Securing Employment Opportunities for Youth” (Guidelines for Securing Employment Opportunities for Youth) were established, which obligated employers to make efforts to set recruitment conditions allowing previous graduates to apply for jobs offered for new graduates, and to introduce year-round recruitment and autumn recruitment. In 2010, the guidelines were partially revised to additionally require the employers to make efforts to allow graduates within at least three years from graduation to apply for jobs offered for new graduates.⁷ Also in 2010, *New Graduate Support Hello Work* offices were established in prefectures, creating a system where *Hello Work* offices and schools collaborate in supporting school graduates without job offers, previous graduates, and dropouts.⁸ This initiative is an extension of the 2000 Emergency Support Program for Jobless Graduates.

Second, advancement has been seen in the support for student career development through industry-academia collaboration. The 1997 Tri-Ministerial Agreement defined internship as “one form of industry-academia collaboration” and categorized internship programs into three types: those incorporated in university coursework, those treated as extracurricular activities at universities, and those implemented by companies as programs independent of universities. However, following the release of the Japan Revitalization Strategy, the Tri-Ministerial Agreement was partially revised in 2014 to explicitly state the need for the active involvement of universities in internship programs and provide guidelines for companies in handling student information obtained through these programs. The Industry-Academia Council on the Future of Recruitment and University Education, inaugurated in 2019 with participation from the employers’ association and the universities’ association, in its report published in 2022, categorized “industry-academia collaborative initiatives in supporting student career development” into (1) open company, (2) career education, (3) general/specialized skills utilization internship, and (4) advanced specialized internship, aiming to promote their dissemination.⁹ Following this report, the Tri-Ministerial Agreement was revised in 2022 to explicitly state that it is desirable to incorporate these initiatives into the curricula of universities, and that companies may use student information obtained through general/specialized skills utilization internship programs for their publicity activities and recruitment selection processes.¹⁰ In 2023, flexibility was introduced to the recruitment schedule rules to ensure that for candidates assessed through highly specialized internship programs, companies may issue informal job offers before the official start date of recruitment selection activities in June, if it is not before the official start date of publicity activities in March.¹¹

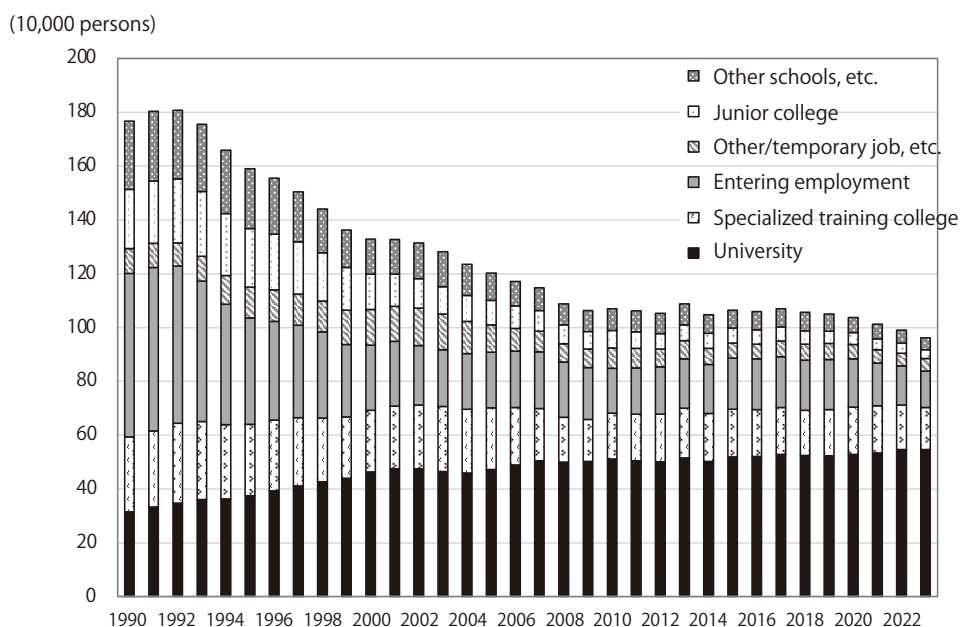
Third, regulations concerning job vacancy and job seeker information were strengthened as a measure to enhance the quality of matching. The Youth Employment Promotion Act, enacted in 2015, required employers recruiting new graduates to accurately disclose working conditions for the jobs they would offer. It also established a system for providing youth employment information, including the average length of service, availability and content of training programs, and overtime working hours. These measures can be recognized as the institutionalization of realistic job preview (RJP) (Kanai 1994), an approach to prevent mismatches by disclosing workplace information in advance. Furthermore, the 2022 amendment to the Employment Security Act reorganized employment placement services and recruitment/candidate information provision services following the emergence of new service models. It also made it obligatory for employers to represent information on job openings accurately and established rules for handling personal information (Kurashige and Shiraishi 2023).

As reviewed above, in youth employment policies since around 2000, measures have been implemented to support young people facing difficulties in school-to-work transition and to improve matching in the simultaneous

recruitment of new graduates. The basic framework of the Japanese model of school-to-work transition—where students engage in job hunting while in school and join companies simultaneously upon graduation—has basically remained unchanged over these 20 years. However, this period can be summarized as a period when the new graduate labor market was incorporated in the legal framework and the social networks of relevant entities and government ministries and agencies, with attempts made to strengthen its functionality.

3. Post-high school career paths and employment status of new graduates

Figure 1 shows the post-high school career paths from 1990 to 2023. The number of high school graduates peaked at 1.8 million in 1992 and declined to 960,000 in 2023. The number of new high school graduates entering employment, which stood at 610,000 in 1990, decreased significantly during the employment ice-age¹² and shrank to 210,000 by 2004. It continued to decline thereafter, dropping to 140,000 in 2023. Those who became unemployed or took temporary jobs after graduation are included in “other/temporary job, etc.” The number of those included in this category stood at 90,000 in 1990, increased during the employment ice-age, and peaked at 140,000 in 2002. Subsequently, the number included in “other/temporary job, etc.” has decreased, staying at around 50,000 from 2020 to 2023.



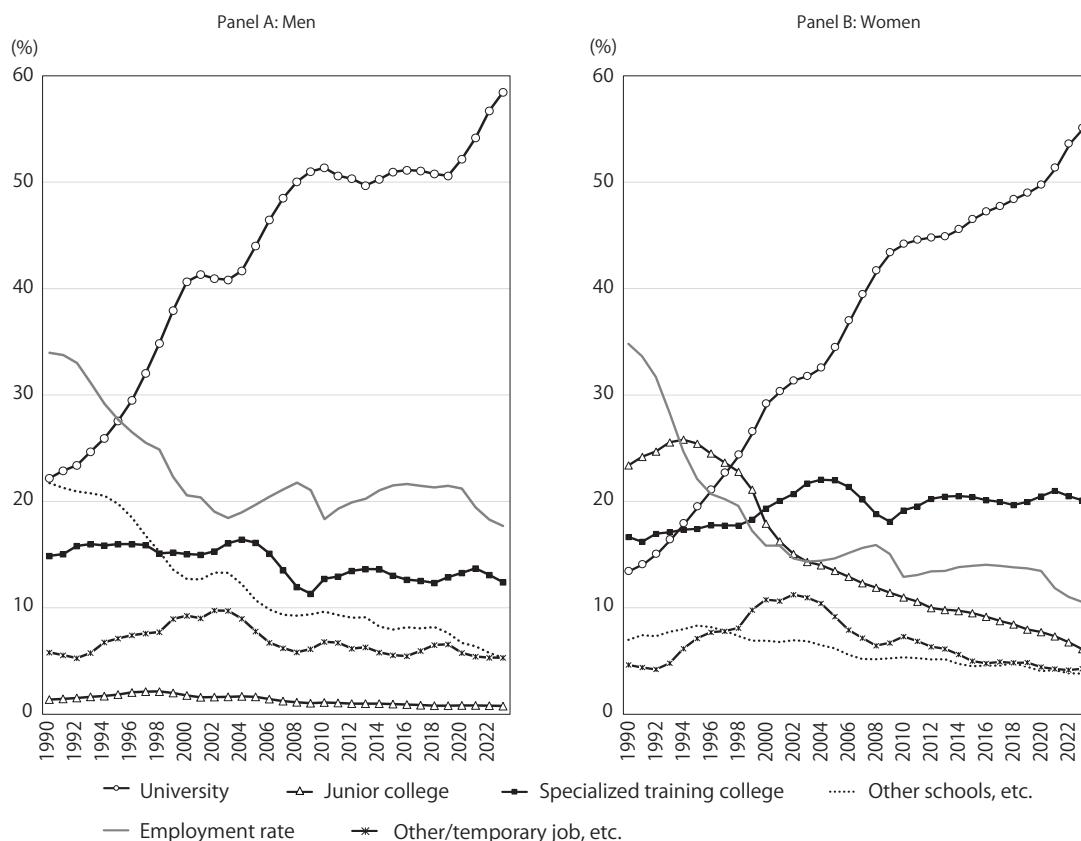
Source: Created by the author based on MEXT, *School Basic Survey*.

Note: “University” refers to new undergraduate students. “Junior college” refers to new regular course students. “Other schools, etc.” includes new students enrolled in correspondence courses of universities or junior colleges, special courses at universities or junior colleges, specialized courses at high schools, upper secondary department at special needs schools (advanced course), general courses at specialized training colleges, and public institutions for the development of vocational abilities, etc. “Entering employment” does not include those who entered employment upon entering higher education. For 2020 onwards, “Entering employment” represents the total of self-employed people, permanent employees, and fixed-term employees with a contract of one year or longer and equivalent to full-time workers. For the 2015-2019 period, “Entering employment” represents the total of regular employees and non-regular employees. “Other/temporary job, etc.” represents: the total of those unemployed and those deceased or unknown from 1990 to 2003; the total of those in temporary jobs, those not included in the above categories, and those deceased or unknown from 2004 to 2019; the total of temporary workers, those not included in the above categories, those deceased or unknown, and fixed-term employees with a contract period of less than one year or equivalent to short-time workers from 2020 onward.

Figure 1. Changes in the number of high school graduates by career path

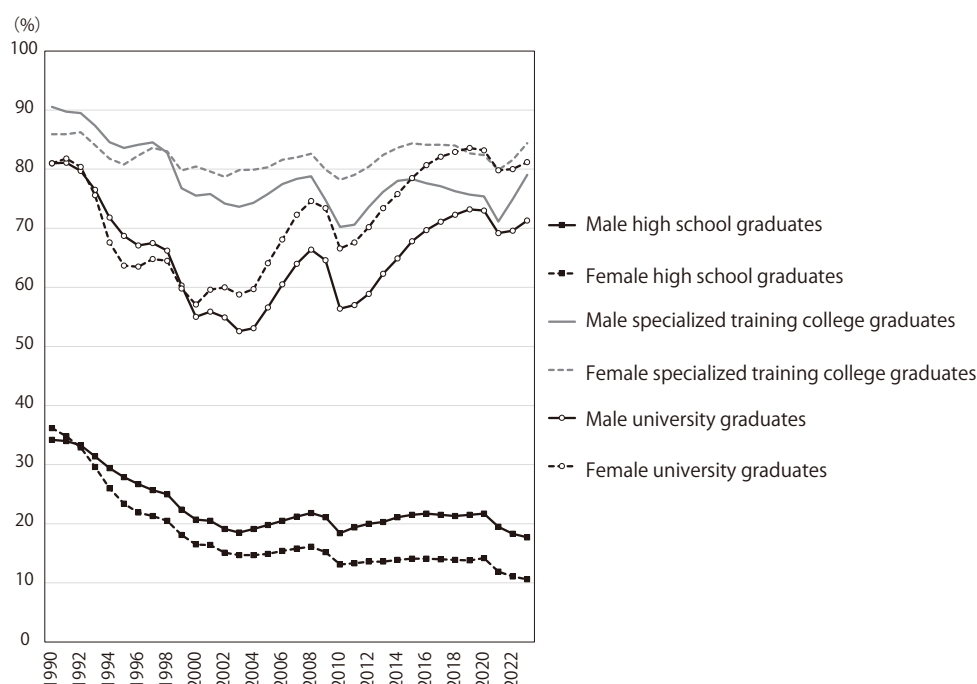
Amidst the decline in the number of new high school graduates entering employment, the number of those going to university increased by over 200,000 from 310,000 in 1990 to 550,000 in 2023. Figure 2 shows the share of each career path chosen by high school graduates, separated by gender (Panel A for men, Panel B for women). The proportion of university entrants among high school graduates was 22.2% for men and 13.5% for women in 1990. The number rose to 41.7% and 32.6% respectively by 2004, reaching 58.5% for men and 55.1% for women by 2023. The number of specialized training college entrants has decreased during this period, but amidst the decline in the number of those entering employment and those going to junior colleges, specialized training colleges have become the second most common choice of post-high school career path following universities. While the number of specialized training college entrants has been about half the number of people entering employment among male high school graduates, specialized training college entrants have consistently outnumbered people entering employment among female high school graduates since 1999. The proportion of those going to specialized training colleges among high school graduates has been around 15% for men and around 20% for women. Further research is expected with regard to entry into specialized training colleges and post-graduation career paths.

Figure 3 shows changes in the employment rate for new graduates from 1990 to 2023. The employment rate for high school graduates was 34.2% for men and 36.2% for women in 1990, but fell to 19.1% and 14.7%, respectively, by 2004. In 2023, the employment rate stood at 17.7% for men and 10.6% for women. During the employment ice-age, the employment rate decreased both among university graduates and specialized training



Source: Created by the author based on MEXT, *School Basic Survey*.

Figure 2. Percentage of each career path chosen by high school graduates

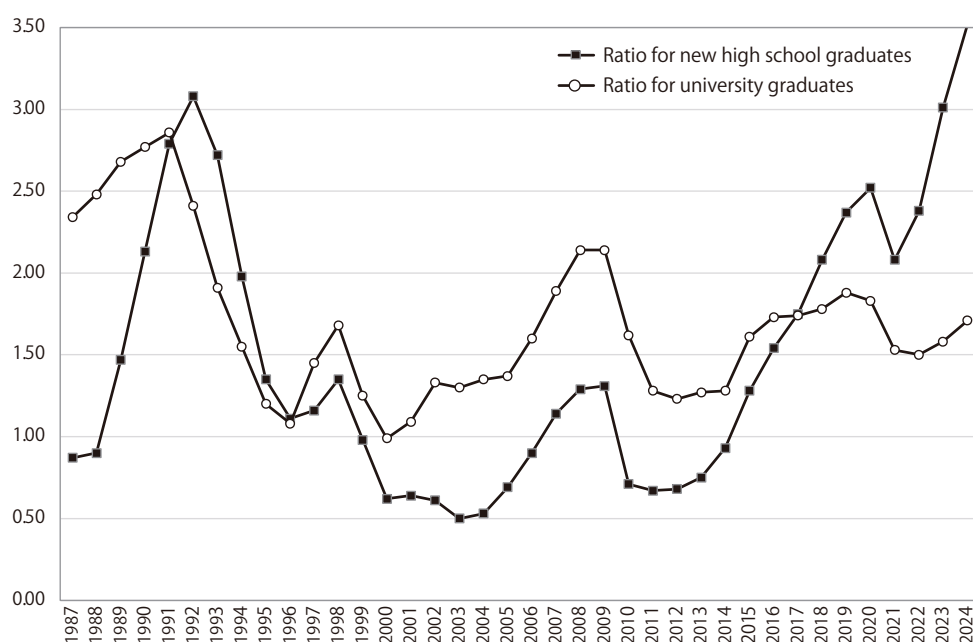


Source: Created by the author based on MEXT, *School Basic Survey*.

Note: The number of university graduates entering employment refers to: the total of those entering employment and those who entered employment upon entering higher education from 1990 to 2019; and the total of self-employed people and permanent employees (among graduates entering employment), “graduates entering higher education” who were in employment, and “fixed-term employees” with a contract of one year or longer or equivalent to full-time workers from 2020 onwards. The employment rate for high school graduates is the number of graduates entering employment as a percentage of the total number of graduates. The employment rate for specialized training college graduates is the number of graduates entering employment as a percentage of the total number of graduates in postsecondary courses, which is calculated by making reference to the “total” number of graduates “by management entity” and the “number of graduates entering employment among the total” in the table of “number of graduates from postsecondary courses by department” (Uenishi 2013).

Figure 3. Changes in the employment rate of new graduates

college graduates, with the drop among university graduates being more pronounced. After falling again following the Lehman’s collapse, employment rates recovered throughout the 2010s. Among university and specialized training college graduates, the employment rate for women has been greater than that for men since the latter half of the employment ice-age. Among university graduates, the employment rate for women has consistently surpassed that for men by about 10 percentage points. While the employment rate for female university graduates reached the pre-ice-age level in the late 2010s, the employment rate for male university graduates has not yet recovered to that level. Figure 4 shows the job openings-to-applicants ratios for new university and high school graduates. After rising during the bubble economy period, the ratios plummeted during the employment ice-age. In the course of recovery, the ratios dropped again due to the economic crisis caused by the Lehman’s collapse, and then resumed an upward trend. The recent rise in the ratio for new high school graduates has been particularly striking, with the ratio for March 2024 graduates reaching a level beyond the level in the bubble economy period. In comparison, the growth in the ratio for new university graduates has been sluggish.



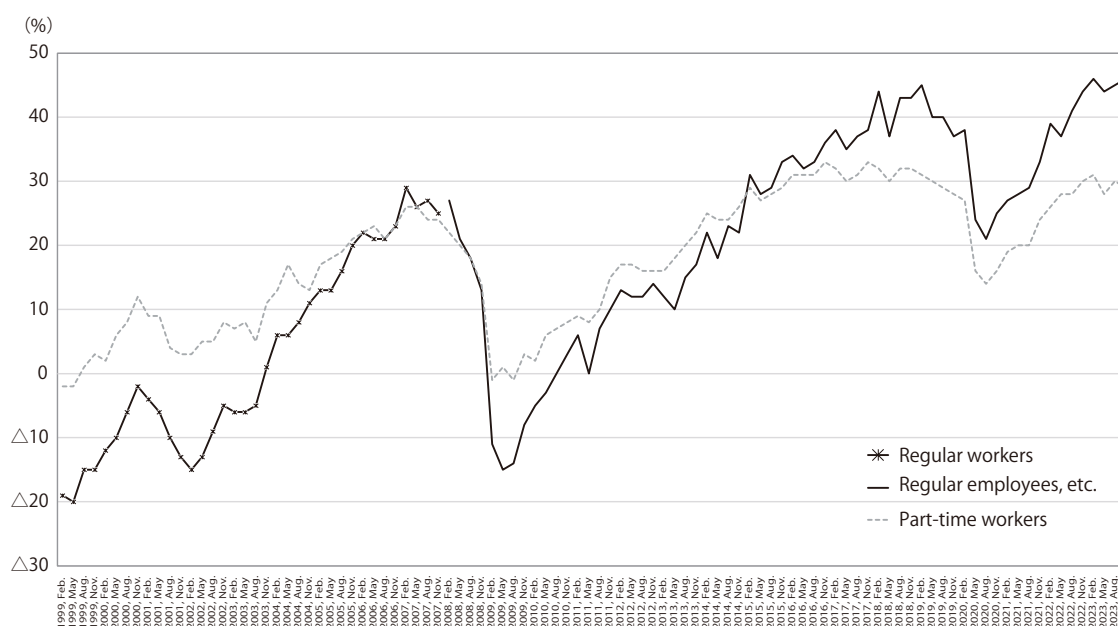
Source: Created by the author based on the MHLW, “Status of job openings, job applications, and job offers for high school and junior high school graduates,” and Recruit Works Institute, “Works job openings-to-applications ratio survey for university graduates.”

Figure 4. Changes in job openings-to-applications ratios for new graduates

III. Early job separation among young workers

Unemployment and job separation among young people are common challenges faced by advanced countries and have attracted considerable scholarly attention. In Japan, the phenomenon of new graduates leaving their jobs within the first three years of employment gained prominence in the 1990s, with the turnover rate reaching 70% for junior high school graduates, 50% for high school graduates, and 30% for university graduates. Traditionally, the view that attributed young people’s tendency to leave or change jobs early to their low career awareness or motivation to stay was prevalent. However, starting with studies by Genda (2001) and others, the approach to explaining that phenomenon with a focus on insufficient labor demand and labor market characteristics became widespread. In particular, research on the “generation effect” was carried out actively. The generation effect refers to a phenomenon where the status of people belonging to a generation who graduates during an economic downturn negatively impacts their subsequent employment status and working conditions (Ohta 2010). Research on the generation effect of job separation, by comparing the employment ice-age generation with earlier cohorts, demonstrated that insufficient labor demand at the time of graduation resulted in a higher probability of leaving jobs (Kurosawa and Genda 2001; Genda, Kondo, and Ohta 2010; Ohta, Genda, and Kondo 2007). Research on the generation effect has shed light on the dysfunctional aspects of Japan’s labor market systems, such as the system of simultaneous recruitment of new graduates where favorable employment opportunities are concentrated at the time of graduation, and the skills development system that prioritizes regular employees in allocating training opportunities.

The major difference between the employment ice-age and the present is the improvement in the employment situation and the rise in the sense of labor shortages among companies. Figure 5 shows changes in the labor surplus/shortage judgment diffusion index (D.I.) tracked by the MHLW in its “Survey on Labour Economy Trend.” During the employment ice-age, the D.I. for regular workers was significantly lower than that for part-



Source: Created by the author based on the MHLW, "Survey on Labour Economy Trend."

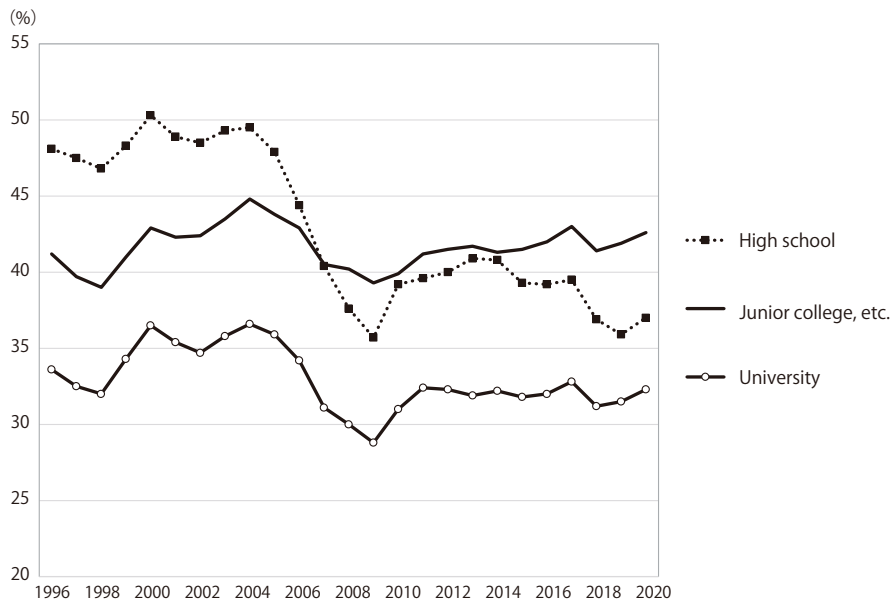
Note: The diffusion index (D.I.) is calculated by subtracting the percentage of establishments reporting a labor surplus from the percentage of those reporting a labor shortage. From the February 2008 survey, the name of the category of "regular workers" was changed to "regular employees, etc." and its definition was partially changed. The "regular employees, etc." is defined as "people employed without a fixed term of employment or people employed under an employment contract for a period of one year or longer, except for 'part-time workers' as defined below" (the underlined phrase was added in the February 2008 survey; for the definition of part-time workers, refer to the same survey).

Figure 5. Changes in labor surplus/shortage judgment D.I.

time workers, indicating a strong sense of excess supply of regular workers among companies. Subsequently, the D.I. for regular workers gradually rose, recovering to the same level as that for part-time workers by 2006. The D.I. sharply dropped for both regular and part-time workers due to the Lehman crisis in 2008 but then recovered, and a growing sense of shortage emerged around 2011. Since 2015, demand for regular employees, etc. has been greater than that for part-time workers.

While the employment situation has changed in this way, no major change has been observed in early job separation among young workers. Figure 6 shows the turnover rate for new graduates within the first three years of employment, calculated by the MHLW from employment insurance records. Among high school graduates, the rate of those leaving their jobs within the first three years of employment had been around 50% until the early 2000s. This rate declined in the late 2000s and has stayed around 40% since the 2010s. Among university and junior college graduates, with slight declines observed in the late 2000s, the rate of those leaving their jobs within the first three years of employment has been around 30% for university graduates and 40% for junior college graduates, respectively.

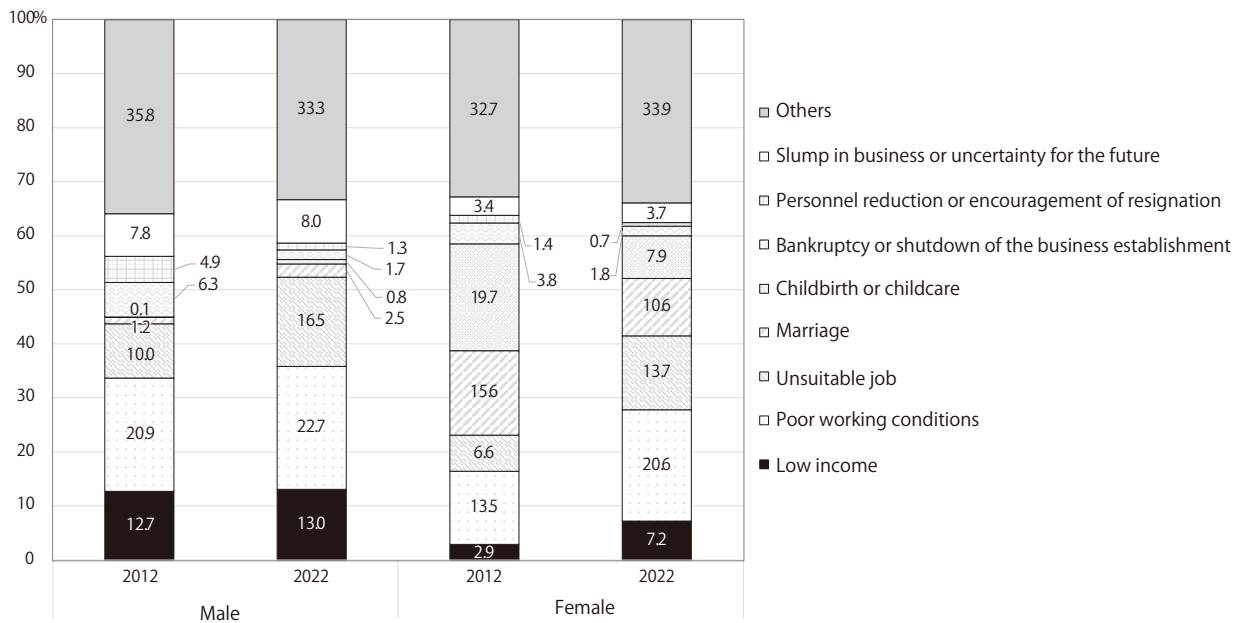
To explore the background of early job separation among new graduates, changes in the reasons for leaving jobs among young regular employees are examined. Figure 7 shows aggregated data regarding the reasons for job separation among people aged 15 to 34 who left their previous regular employment. According to this data, major reasons why young regular employees quit their jobs include low income, poor working conditions, and the job being unsuitable for them. Moreover, the combined percentage of separations for these reasons has increased from 43.6% (2012) to 52.3% (2022) for men and from 23.0% to 41.5% for women. The significant expansion among women should not be overlooked. Another major change concerning women is the decline in



Source: Created by the author based on the MHLW, "Status of job separation of new graduates by length of service."

Note: Data for graduates in March 2021 and thereafter are not indicated because three years have not yet passed since employment.

Figure 6. Changes in the turnover rate for new graduates within the first three years of employment



Source: Created by the author based on the Statistics Bureau, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), *Employment Status Survey*.

Note: The period when separation from the previous employment occurred is: from October 2020 to September 2021 for 2022 data and from October 2010 to September 2011 for 2012 data. "Others" include: "termination of the employment contract," "temporary job," "family member's job change/transfer or workplace relocation," "caregiving/nursing," "illness/old age," and "others."

Figure 7. Reasons for job separation among people who left their previous regular employment (aged 15 to 34)

the rate of job separation due to marriage, childbirth, or childcare. The combined percentage of separations “for marriage” and “for childbirth/childcare” accounted for 35.4% of the total of reasons for women’s job separation in 2012 but then it fell to 18.5% by 2022. These trends suggest that, as factors that cause job separation among young workers and prevent their retention at the workplace, young regular employees may be leaving industries and workplaces with poor working conditions and low wages amid the rising labor demand. They also indicate the need to focus on changes in the behavior of young women engaging in work.

IV. Trends in non-regular employment and unemployment of young people

As an indicator of the current state of youth labor, trends among young people entering non-regular employment and those unemployed have attracted as much as or more attention than early job separation. Research and studies on freeters progressed, starting with those by the Japan Institute of Labour (2000, 2001). Regarding youth unemployment, following the introduction of the concept of “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment or Training) from the United Kingdom (Japan Institute of Labour 2003), the concept of “Japanese-version of NEET” (“people aged 15 to 34 out of the labor force who are not primarily attending school or primarily engaged in housework”) emerged (Kosugi 2004). Research on non-regular employment revealed that the shift from non-regular to regular employment is less common in Japan compared to other countries (Shikata 2011), and that men, highly educated people, and younger people are more likely to make a transition to regular employment. Horii (2019), analyzing the current situation of the employment ice-age generation entering middle age, points out that among those whose first job was not regular employment, the proportion of those currently in non-regular employment or unemployed is high, indicating that the disadvantages experienced upon graduation persist. Factors promoting transition to regular employment include experience in non-regular employment in the same company (Genda 2008), the content of the job assigned during non-regular employment in the context of internal promotion (Genda 2009), off-the-job training (Kosugi 2011), past experience in regular employment (Kosugi 2011), and utilization of *Hello Work* offices and social networks (Fukui 2017). Factors associated with youth unemployment include being female, having lower educational attainment, and lacking employment experience in the past (Genda 2007). Pathways through which they become unemployed vary, including family, school, and workplace (Kosugi 2004; Kosugi ed. 2005). In the early 2000s, the concepts of social exclusion and social inclusion were introduced as a comprehensive perspective for understanding the complex difficulties experienced by the unemployed throughout their life courses (Higuchi 2004; Miyamoto 2004).

First, let us examine changes in the share of non-regular employees among young people. Figure 8, using data from the *Employment Status Survey*, shows changes in the composition of employed people aged 15 to 34 from 2002 to 2022. For men (Panel A), the number of regular employees decreased from 8.91 million in 2002 to 6.26 million in 2022, and their share in the employed population also declined from 77.1% to 73.2%. During the same period, the number of non-regular employees increased from 1.78 million to 1.91 million, and their share in the employed population expanded from 15.4% to 22.4%. For women (Panel B), the number of regular employees decreased from 4.79 million in 2002 to 4.00 million in 2012, then took an upward turn, reaching 4.76 million in 2022. Although this is merely the recovery to the 2002 level, the proportion of regular employees among all employed people expanded from 54.6% (2002) to 60.6% (2022) due to the overall decline in the number of employed people. The number of non-regular employees decreased from 3.53 million in 2002 to 2.87 million, and their share in the employed population also declined from 40.2% (2002) to 36.5% (2022). The data suggests that the trends among young men and women over these 20 years have been contrasting: the share of non-regular employment among young men has increased, while the share of regular employment among young women has increased.

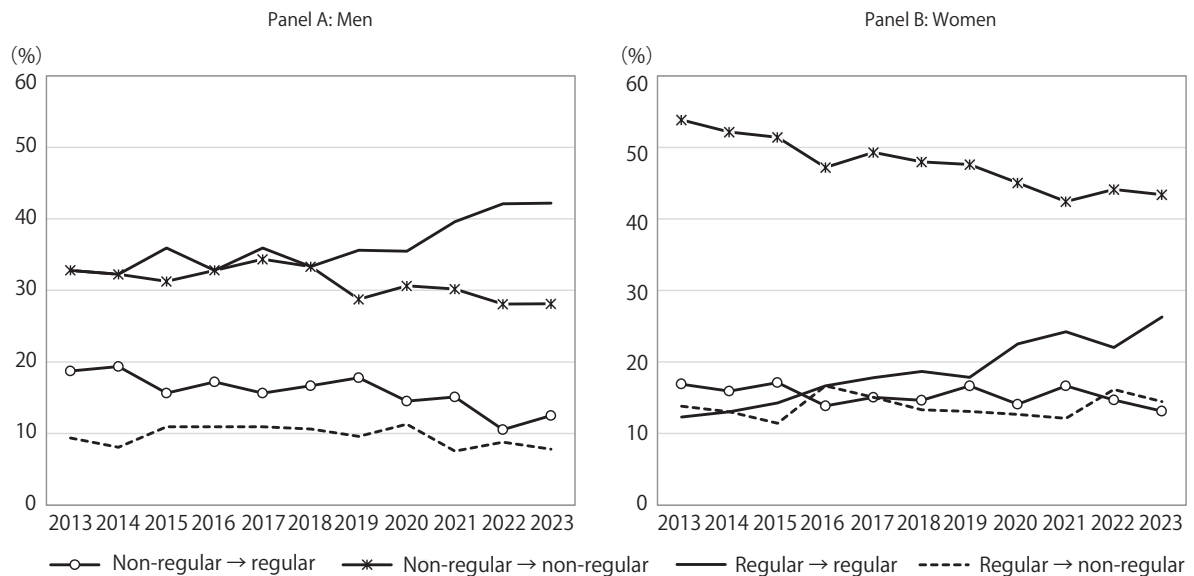
Next, let us examine the trends in the transition from non-regular to regular employment. Figure 9 shows the

proportion of people who became employed among those who left their jobs in the past one year, broken down by employment status of previous and current jobs, for people aged 15 to 34. For men (Panel A), the share of those who changed jobs from non-regular to regular employment is less than 20% and has been declining



Source: Created by the author based on the Statistics Bureau, MIC, *Employment Status Survey*.

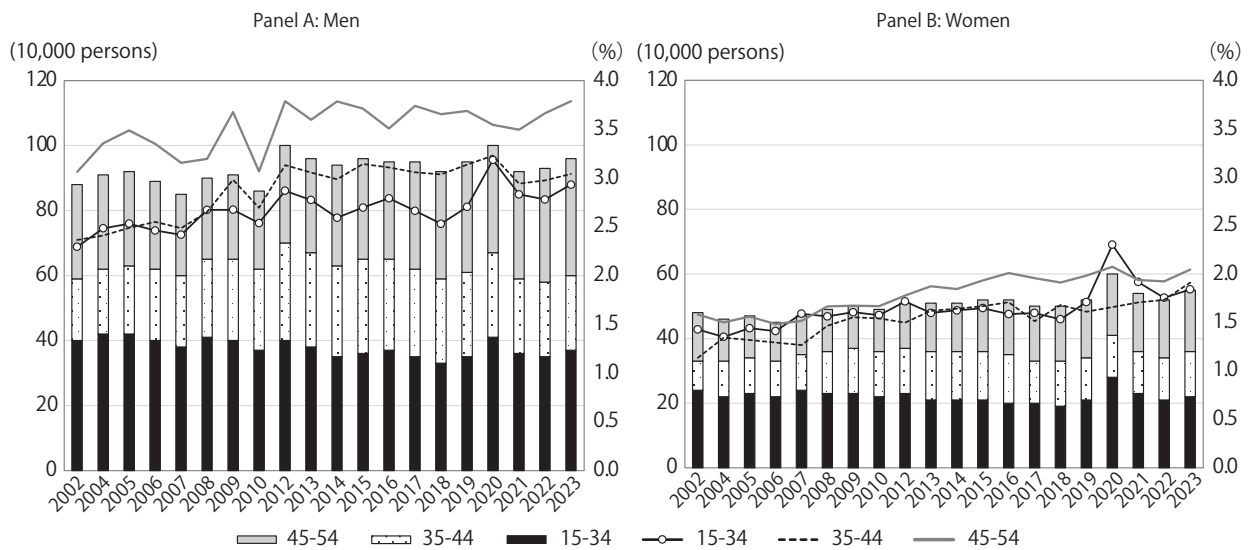
Figure 8. Changes in the number and composition of employed people (aged 15 to 34)



Source: Created by the author based on the Statistics Bureau, MIC, *Labour Force Survey* (detailed tabulation).

Note: The Labour Force Survey only captures people moving between companies and does not cover conversion from non-regular to regular employment through internal promotion in the same company.

Figure 9. Rate of people who became employed among those who left their jobs in the past one year (aged 15 to 34)



Source: Created by the author based on the Statistics Bureau, MIC, *Labour Force Survey* (detailed tabulation).

Note: People out of the labor force who are neither engaged in housework nor attending school are defined as *mugyosha* (people not in work or education; “others”).

Figure 10. Changes in the number and rate of people not in work or education

between 2013 and 2023. The largest share is observed for those who changed jobs in the same employment status. While the share of changes from non-regular to non-regular jobs has declined, the share of changes from regular to regular jobs has expanded. The trends for women (Panel B) are similar to those for men: the share of those who changed jobs from non-regular to regular employment is less than 20% and has not expanded. The share of those who changed jobs in the same employment status for women has changed more significantly than for men. Between 2013 and 2023, the share of changes from regular to regular jobs increased by 14 percentage points, while the share of changes from non-regular to non-regular jobs decreased by 10 percentage points. This means that, while the share of regular employees moving between companies has increased, the share of non-regular employees becoming regular employees through job changes has not increased.

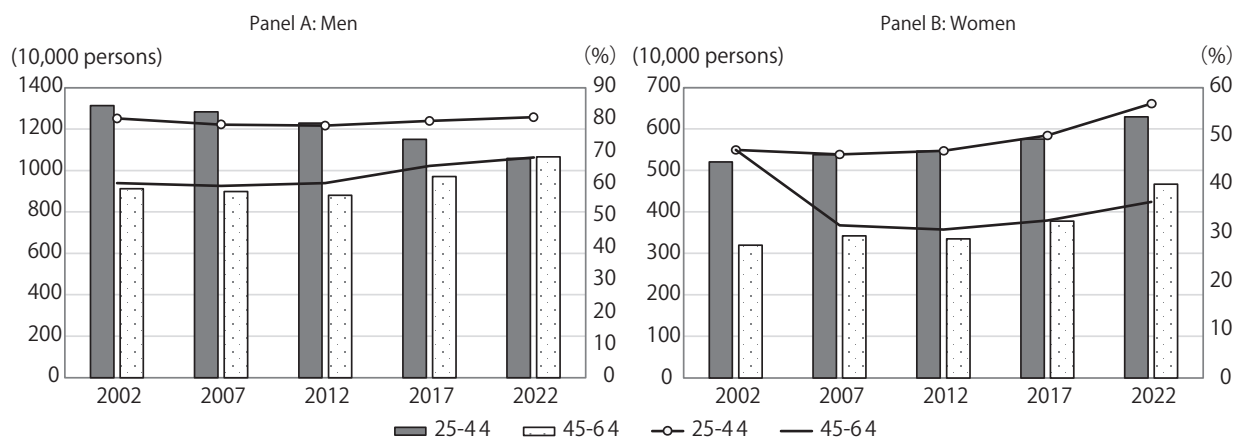
The MHLW defines people out of the labor force who are neither engaged in housework nor attending school (not in work or education) as *mugyosha*. Based on this definition, Figure 10 shows the number of those people not in work or education and their percentage of the population aged 15. The total number of people aged 15 to 54 not in work or education has remained around 900,000 for men and around 500,000 for women. The number of young people aged 15 to 34 not in work or education has remained largely flat from 2002 to 2023, standing at 370,000 for men and 220,000 for women in 2023. The rate of those young people not in work or education at that time was 2.9% and 1.8% for men and women, respectively, showing a slight but increasing trend. The rates of people not in work or education among those aged 35 to 44 and those aged 45 to 54 are comparable to or higher than that among young people, indicating that individuals not in work or education exist across a broad range of age groups from youth into middle age.

V. Continued employment of older workers and youth labor

In tandem with youth employment policies, the government has promoted measures for continued employment of older workers. To enhance the sustainability of public pensions and address the decline in the working-age

population, companies have also developed systems for maintaining employment of older workers in a phased manner. The amendment to the Act on Stabilization of Employment of Elderly Persons that came into effect in 2006 introduced the obligation of companies to take measures to secure employment for elderly persons until 65 years of age, specifically, any of the following measures: (1) raising the mandatory retirement age; (2) introducing the continued employment system; or (3) abolishing the mandatory retirement age. The 2013 amendment expanded the scope of people eligible for these measures to secure employment to cover all elderly employees who wish to continue to work in principle, followed by the 2021 amendment requiring companies to make efforts to secure employment of their employees until the age of 70. Research has shown that the 2006 and 2013 amendments increased the employment rate of older workers (Kondo 2014; Moriyama 2022). The phenomenon where continued employment for older workers deprives younger workers of their employment opportunities is studied as the “displacement effect.” As summarized by Ohta (2010) and Yasuda, Araki, and Martinez Dahbura (2019), numerous studies have confirmed that the recruitment of younger workers tends to be reduced in companies and workplaces where middle-aged and older employees account for a large share of employees.

While there may be various ways to distinguish between younger and middle-aged/older workers, studies on the displacement effect often use the proportion of workers aged 45 or over as an indicator of aging. Therefore, this paper divides employed people into two groups, i.e., those aged 25 to 44 (younger workers) and those aged 45 to 64 (middle-aged/older workers), and examines the number of regular employees and their share in the total employed population for each group. Figure 11 shows the results of this analysis. Regular employees aged 45 to 64 have increased for both men and women. Regular employees also increased among women aged 25 to 44 but decreased among men in the same age group. The proportion of regular employees among men aged 25 to 44 has remained around 80%, while among those aged 45 to 64, it rose from 60.4% (2002) to 68.4% (2022). Among women, the proportion of regular employees aged 25 to 44 expanded from 47.1% (2002) to 56.7% (2022), whereas the proportion of those aged 45 to 64 showed signs of recovery in recent years but declined from 47.1% in 2002 to 36.4% in 2022. The results suggest that, based on the classification adopted in this paper, no decline in the share of regular employees among younger workers has been observed alongside the increase in middle-aged and older regular employees. However, this should be examined in further detail because alternative ways of classification may be possible and the continued employment of older workers could affect the working styles of younger workers in forms other than regular employment.¹³



Source: Created by the author based on the Statistics Bureau, MIC, *Employment Status Survey*.

Figure 11. Number of regular employees and their share in the total employed population (aged 25 to 44 and 45 to 64)

VI. Conclusion

This paper reviewed the framework of the Japanese model of school-to-work transition and the development of youth employment policies, and examined various related phenomena from a long-term perspective, including the situation of employment and job separation of new graduates, trends in precarious employment of young people, such as non-regular employment and unemployment, and relevance between the continued employment of older workers and the working styles of younger workers. Among these, job separation and precarious employment of younger workers and the inter-generation relevance in labor have been studied to clarify their mechanisms, with the primary focus on the employment ice-age generation. Meanwhile, Japan's demographic structure as well as the academic attainment composition and employment situation of young people have undergone significant changes. While the framework for the Japanese model of school-to-work transition remains basically unchanged, policies addressing its dysfunctions have been implemented. Although this paper could not fully explore it, re-examining the explanatory framework formed during the employment ice-age within this new context represents an important research issue today.

Previous youth employment policies have centered on supporting the shift from non-regular to regular employment. While this remains crucial, given the existence of people working in non-regular employment from youth into middle age due to various circumstances, it is necessary to promote improvement in wage disparities depending on the employment status, and study into trends in this area is an important task. Furthermore, requiring people to engage in job-seeking activities and employment as a condition for receiving social welfare benefits is the concept of activation (Miyamoto 2009). However, Japan's self-reliance support policies are characterized by "employment support without a welfare perspective," and their limitations have been pointed out (Sakurai 2019). The future of self-reliance support accompanied by income security is another crucial issue in youth labor, alongside the wage disparity between regular and non-regular employment.

This paper is a translation of the author's paper "*Jakunen rodo no henyo to genzai*" [Transformation and Persistence in Japanese Youth Labor Market] submitted to and published in the *Japanese Journal of Labour Studies* (Vol. 66, No.767, June 2024) with some additions and amendments in line with the gist of *Japan Labor Issues*.

Notes

1. The MHLW, "Dai 32 kai Kotogakko shushoku mondai kento kaigi" [The 32nd meeting of the high school employment issues review committee]. https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_30988.html (in Japanese; last accessed on March 29, 2024).
2. The MEXT and the MHLW, "'Kosotsusha no shokugyo seikatsu no iko ni kansuru kenkyu' saishu hokoku" [Final report on research on the entry of high school graduates into vocational life]. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2002/03/h0305-1b.html> (in Japanese; last accessed on March 29, 2024).
3. The MHLW and the MEXT, "Kotogakko shushoku mondai kento kaigi wakingu chimu hokoku: Kotogakko sotsugyosha no shushoku kanko no arikata ni tsuite" [Report of the working team of the high school employment issues review committee: Desirable employment practices for high school graduates]. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/11601000/000594160.pdf> (in Japanese; last accessed on March 29, 2024).
4. The recruitment/candidate information provision service under the Employment Security Act refers to the service of providing information on job vacancies and job seekers. Conventionally, this service referred to the service of providing information to companies seeking workers and people seeking jobs upon the request of these companies and people. Following the advent of new models of employment agency services, the 2022 amendment to the Employment Security Act has expanded the definition to include providing collected information without request and providing information to employment placement service providers and recruitment/candidate information providers.
5. Cabinet Office, "Gakusei no shushoku saiyo katsudo kaishi jiki to ni kansuru chosa" [Survey on the start time and other matters of students' job seeking and recruitment activities]. <https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai1/gakuseichosa/index.html> (in Japanese; last accessed on March 29, 2024). The percentage of students who used "direct application (entry via websites, etc.)" was 77.1% for liberal arts students and 68.9% for science students. The next most common route for finding jobs was "information from companies where students participated in internship programs (recruiters, university alumni, referral recruitment)" (11.6% for liberal arts students, 12.8% for science students).

- Among science students, “recommendation by faculty or university/designated school system” accounted for 8.0%. This survey targeted students from approximately 60 universities selected considering factors such as region, management entity, and size. As it employs the non-probability sampling method, caution is required regarding the statistical generalization of the results.
6. The Youth Trial Employment Program supported companies accepting jobless graduates in short-term trial employment by providing them with incentives for promotion of youth stable employment and offering employment management advice, thereby facilitating young people’s transition to regular employment.
 7. Following the promulgation of the Youth Employment Promotion Act, the guidelines for securing employment opportunities for youth were abolished, and since 2015, their function has been taken over by the “Guidelines for appropriate measures by employers, job placement service providers, and other related parties for securing employment opportunities for youth and their retention” (Guidelines for employers and others).
 8. Oshima (2012) revealed that university career service offices function as a safety net for students struggling with job hunting. Furthermore, Komikawa (2020) pointed out that around 2000, university job support expanded to cover career support and career education, deepening the relationship between universities and private human resources and education businesses.
 9. Industry-Academia Council on the Future of Recruitment and University Education, “Saiyo to daigaku kyoiku no mirai ni kansuru sangaku renkei kyogikai 2021 nendo hokokusho: Sangaku kyodo ni yoru jiritsuteki na kyaria keisei no suishin” [FY2021 Report of the Industry-Academia Council on the Future of Recruitment and University Education: Autonomous career development through industry-academia collaboration]. <https://www.keidanren.or.jp/policy/2022/039.html> (in Japanese; last accessed on March 29, 2024).
 10. The MEXT, the MHLW, and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), “Intanshippu wo hajime to suru gakusei no kyaria keisei shien ni kakaru torikumi no suishin ni atatte no kihonteki kangaekata” [Basic approach to promote internship programs and other initiatives to support student career development]. https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/shushoku_katsudou_yousei/2024nendosotu/yousei2.pdf (in Japanese; last accessed on March 29, 2024).
 11. Inter-Ministerial Liaison Conference on the Schedule for Job-Seeking and Recruitment Activities, “Intanshippu wo katsuyo shita shushoku saiyo katsudo nittei ruru no minaoshi ni tsuite” [Revision of rules for schedules of job seeking and recruitment activities using internship programs]. https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/shushoku_katsudou/index.html (in Japanese; last accessed on March 29, 2024).
 12. While there is no definitive definition of the “employment ice-age” (generation), this paper defines the period from 1993 to 2004 as the employment ice-age.
 13. Ohta (2010) points out that middle-aged and older workers began to engage in jobs traditionally held by younger workers, by examining occupational segregation between middle-aged/older and younger workers using national census data. While Yasuda, Araki, and Martinez Dahbura (2019) confirm a displacement effect in large corporations, such displacement may not be observed in small and medium-sized enterprises where more older workers are being employed against a backdrop of youth labor shortages.

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