

The Japanese Education System: Globalisation and International Education

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Abstract

This paper argues that Japanese choose to study abroad for several key reasons. Deficiencies in the Japanese education system and the reform debate comprise the core of the study, along with the increasing impact on Japan of the various forces associated with globalisation. In developing the argument, a range of social and economic factors are addressed, including: social change in recent decades; the language of globalisation and neoliberal economics in the public sector; conflict that inhibits educational reform; changes in hiring practices; the role the rapidly declining birth rate will play in social change and public sector restructuring; Japan as an education exporter; and characteristics of Japanese studying abroad.

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Introduction

This paper attempts to define the context for general dissatisfaction with the education system in Japan and to explain why this, working in tandem with the processes of globalisation and enduring affluence, has led to Japan becoming one of the world's largest sources of study abroad students.¹ The key factors addressed are contemporary social and economic currents in Japan.

Methodology

Formal academic publications were the primary sources used in this study, in addition to a large volume of newspaper and magazine articles, policy documents, Japanese government statistics and conference papers. Central, however, to making this study current was a series of interviews conducted in Japan between 9 and 25 June, 2001. Interviewees included international education recruitment agents, educators, Australian diplomatic mission officers, human resource managers, job recruitment agencies and policy unit staff.

Japanese Students Abroad

In 1996 the number of Japanese travelling abroad exceeded 16 million for the first time. Tourists alone represented 13.7 million, while 180,000 were study abroad students, representing an increase of 9.1 per cent on the previous year. This figure has stayed reasonably stable since then, with just over 180,000 again in 2000.² Twelve years earlier (1988) the figure stood at 84,708.³ Japan is the top source of international students in the US:⁴ more than two-thirds were engaged in undergraduates studies, mostly in the popular disciplines of the arts, business and social sciences, while 17 per cent pursued postgraduate studies.⁵

Japanese study abroad students are a unique sub-group of the broader East Asian cohort of students choosing to gain an education overseas. Compared to other East Asian students their motivation is often described as a change of lifestyle or a 'search for meaning' rather than economic interests.⁶ Other Asian students may want to migrate and this is a way forward, especially if earning power is higher overseas,⁷ and others are seeking an increased standard of living at home on account of the economic pay-offs of an overseas education. Their choice of studies reflect this: in 1997, for example, the British Council discovered that the most popular higher degree program for Japanese postgraduates studying in the United Kingdom was development studies;

¹ *ICS Guidepost International*, Volume 15, No.1, Spring 2000, ICS Inc., Tokyo.

² *ICS Guidepost International*, ICS Inc., Spring 2000.

³ *ICS Guidepost International*, ICS Inc., Spring 2000.

⁴ *ICS Guidepost International*, ICS Inc., Spring 2000.

⁵ *ICS Guidepost International*, ICS Inc., Spring 2000.

⁶ Interview with Minori Takahashi, head, Education Counselling Service, British Council, Tokyo, 14 June, 2001.

⁷ C. Andressen, *Escape From Affluence: Japanese Students in Australia*, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1996, p. 7.

Taiwanese postgraduates by contrast were overwhelmingly engaged in MBA programs.⁸ At the undergraduate level, Japanese students in the UK are predominantly pursuing studies in the Social Sciences (Politics and Law), followed by Arts (History and English).⁹

Study abroad students are becoming both younger and older. That the age of students being sent abroad for English studies is dropping has been particularly noted by all the major Japanese education agencies in the 2001 (northern hemisphere) summer, with it now not being uncommon for 12-year-olds to be travelling unaccompanied to the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom. (An interesting parallel can be made here with the panic that apparently exists amongst some parents in Western societies regarding access to IT education facilities, feeling that if children do not get a strong education in IT studies they will be unable to compete in the employment market of the future; for Japanese parents, English expertise is essential for their children to advance their employment prospects).¹⁰ At the other end of the scale, agencies are seeking to create linkages with overseas schools for the provision of courses and activities aimed at the 'silver' (over-50s) market, which is set to become progressively larger.¹¹ In response to globalisation and neoliberal trends, increasing demand for international education from mid-career individuals has also been identified, reflecting the growing awareness amongst adults of a need for lifelong education in a changing economic, social and vocational environment.¹²

Reasons given by students participating in various studies for choosing to study abroad are varied. Economic downturn, for example, impacts positively on the student abroad market: more young Japanese tend to study abroad during a recession as they want to enhance their employability. Indeed, '...graduates nowadays know there are not the same employment opportunities at the end of domestic college training, and often view overseas study as a necessary educational extension rather than a romanticised adventure'.¹³ Furthermore, the boom in English language education, both in Japan and abroad, following the Plaza Accord yen revaluation in 1985, '... is sort of evidence that English-language education in Japan is inadequate'.¹⁴ The relative cost of education in Japan and competition for places impact on students' decisions to

⁸ Pre-UK Education Exhibition address to UK educators by British Trade and Cultural Office (pseudo British Council) Taipei director Mr Pat Power, Taipei, Taiwan ROC, March 1997. This claim regarding Japanese students was substantiated by Ms Minoru Takahashi, UK Education Counselling Section, British Council, Tokyo in an interview on 14 June, 2001.

⁹ 'Subjects Studied By Japanese Students in the UK', British Council, Tokyo, December 1998.

¹⁰ This contention was confirmed repeatedly in the each of the interviews conducted in Japan (above and below).

¹¹ Interview with Ms Saori Sumi, consultant at International Hello Link, a study abroad recruitment company and temporary staff placement company, Tokyo, 21 June, 2001.

¹² 'Education Export Opportunities: Japan,' Australia International Education Foundation, 1995, p. 19.

¹³ ICS Guidepost International, Spring 1998, p. 1-2.

¹⁴ Professor Shoichi Watanabe, a professor at Sophia University, in 'Students Seek Educational Fortunes Abroad,' *Nikkei Weekly*, 25 April, 1995.

study abroad. Students find that studying in a country like the United States, for example, is not much more expensive than studying at home, especially given the lower cost of living in the US. The costs are, of course, even less in Australia given the weak Australian dollar.

In terms of their decision to study abroad, Japanese students commonly describe the following factors as central:¹⁵

- no choice (cannot succeed in entering a Japanese university)¹⁶
- desire to be linked to a prestige institution abroad
- desire to learn in world-class facilities – i.e. better than at home
- to learn better English
- understand international business and get a prestigious job

There was a noticeable decline in students pursuing English-only courses overseas in the late-1990s, and an increase in demand for English followed by VET sector courses, and also in demand for undergraduate university courses. This reflects a more competitive job market where many employers see English as a 'standard requirement'¹⁷ and therefore students seek to add a further vocational skill sourced overseas, or to evidence success at academic study where the language of instruction was English.

In the early-1990s there was a growing trend to take a year out from university study to study English and audit academic subjects at overseas institutions, before returning to complete a Japanese degree. Male students were also aware that for them this would possibly be the only opportunity to study abroad as once they began work there would be few opportunities to interrupt employment for overseas study.

Unfortunately, the Japanese student diaspora has generated some negative images. The words 'rootless' and 'aimless' continue to arise. They do not always study diligently, abide by social customs and laws in their adopted country, and can be 'the antithesis of the hard-working, serious and law-abiding' Japanese of previous generations who have sought study or permanent abode overseas.¹⁸ There appear to be '...two types of Japanese studying abroad – the international elite and rootless wanderers',¹⁹ reflecting the varying social and economic pressures apparent in their home country. Andressen has outlined a three-way typology that is somewhat more refined, namely a small group of 'achievers' (postgraduates), and much larger groups of 'escapees' (mostly women with degrees) and 'wanderers' (mostly underachieving males entering university).²⁰

¹⁵ 'Education Export Opportunities: Japan'.

¹⁶ For those who failed to enter a good university in Japan, it is also sometimes attractive for parents to send children to a mediocre university abroad, where Japanese awareness of brand name institutions is more limited.

¹⁷ 'Japan Country Profile-January, 2001,' Australian Education International:<http://aei.detya.gov.au/subscribers/marketinfo/NthAsia/Japan/CP/JapCP0106.htm>.

¹⁸ Befu, H., and Eades, J., et al. (eds.), *Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan*, Transasia Press, Melbourne, p. 37.

¹⁹ 'Students Seek Educational Fortunes Abroad', *Nikkei Weekly*, 25 April, 1995.

²⁰ Andressen, 'Escape from Affluence', p. 84.

The primary questions to be answered in this paper are: 1) why do so many Japanese students choose to study abroad and 2) why are there different sub-groups of Japanese overseas students? In answering these questions a number of factors will be examined, including; deficiencies in the Japanese educational system, increasing pressures on the system to respond to external social changes, and conflicts that continue to block reform; shifts within the employment system; the ageing population and pressures on Japanese to become increasingly globalised.

Deficiencies in the Japanese Education System

Forming the basis of calls for education reform are long-standing criticisms, foremost those being aimed at the examination system which forms the backbone of the 'escalator' school system.²¹ Competition for access to prestigious schools and universities is intensely played out through a series of entrance examinations, the preparation for which is often referred to as *shiken jigoku* (or 'examination hell').²² The system is described as being very inflexible and is intensified by the extraordinarily high value placed on the educational background of individuals in society. Japan's education system, therefore, has 'produced homogeneous human resources of considerable level of aptitude and achievement on average...It's fraught with unreasonably intense competition for admission to higher education, and it does not produce human resources that have the individuality and creativity which are needed today'.²³ The failure to implement a more vocationally-oriented and relevant education system has resulted in a system out-of-step with modern 'social and cultural changes', including 'changes in industrial and employment structure; the progress of information-intensive society; and internationalisation in various sectors', as we shall explore further below.²⁴

More importantly, the mental and physical well-being of students is put at risk as a direct consequence of the escalator system. Indeed, students have spent '...relatively little time working out their stress through playing outside or in physical exercise'.²⁵ The examination system curtails 'the development of a well-rounded personality and hurts the mental and physical health of the child by neglecting all activities irrelevant to examinations'.²⁶ The number of students choosing not to attend school as a consequence has been increasingly rapidly in the last decade. In 1994, for example,

²¹ T. Lebra, *Japanese Women: Constraint and Fulfillment* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1984), p. 197

²² Lebra 'Japanese Women', p. 203.

²³ 'Modern Education', *Japan Insight*, (<http://www.jinjapan.org/insight/index.html>) 6 May, 2001.

²⁴ 'The Education System and Private Educational Institutions in Japan,' presented by Taura Hiroki at the 'Educational Restructuring and Economic Growth: The Role of the Public Sector Conference', Kuala Lumpur, November 1992, p. 6.

²⁵ 'Modern Education', *Japan Insight*, (<http://www.jinjapan.org/insight/index.html>) 6 May, 2001.

²⁶ Lebra, 'Japanese Women', p. 205-206.

over 77,000 junior high school students absented themselves for long periods or permanently.²⁷

At the university level there is growing dissatisfaction amongst students with the challenges and outcomes of higher education.²⁸ Japanese undergraduate years (except in broadly-defined 'technical' areas) are famously seen as a four-year break, or reward, for the years of sacrifice to exam preparation. Students generally do not have specific career goals, as many will enter companies on graduation as 'blank sheets'.²⁹ Japanese schools do not traditionally offer career guidance or counselling, so most students do not plan senior high school and university elective studies as a means to realising an occupational 'dream'.³⁰ Attendance at lectures is poor, note-borrowing is widespread and poor behaviour in lecture theatres is common.³¹ Universities have furthermore been described as 'closed shops'.³² Although the university system is seen by many observers to be a bastion of egalitarian access due to what by international standards are comparatively low tuition fees (particularly for public universities, and compared to other advanced nations), the fact remains that access to the most prestigious institutions often depends considerably on access to junior and senior high schools that are either traditional feeder institutions to the top universities, or indeed attached to them. Competition for access to these escalator schools can often start as early as the *yochien* (pre-school) stage and fees are high; therefore, perhaps fee levels across the university spectrum do not vary greatly, but the cost of getting there does.

There is mounting unease also amongst academics about the standards at even the best universities, including the prestigious Tokyo University, with critics voicing concerns that they may 'lose out in the international arena, especially in science and technological research, if no appropriate steps are taken to stem the decline...' In addition to declining academic standards at universities, there is also concern about cuts to the volume of knowledge required to be retained by primary and junior high school students from April 2002.³³

The Education Reform Debate

²⁷ Symbolic of the *shiken jigoku* system has been the *kyoiku mama*, or "education mother", for whom the successful entrance to prestigious schools and universities is paramount to all other seemingly peripheral needs of her children. It is worthy of note that this term has only recently come to be seen as a negative label and therefore most mothers would deny being a *kyoiku mama*. See Lebra, 'Japanese Women', p.205-206 Interview with Ms Yoshiko Fujinobe, Executive Officer, Counselling, ICS Inc., Tokyo, 22 June, 2001.

²⁹ With degrees perhaps in law, engineering, mathematics, but destined for very different career paths as *salarymen* (or to a lesser degree *salarywomen*) in trading companies, or working in the finance sector, which is also the case with many talented graduates with engineering degrees.

³⁰ Interview with Mr Masami Kobayashi, president of the Admissions Company, Osaka, 18 June, 2001.

³¹ Based on observations while visiting over 50 universities in Japan and on discussions with university staff.

³² R. Mouer and Y. Sugimoto, *Images of Japanese Society*, Kegan Paul International, London, 1986, p. 280.

³³ 'Diet passes three reform bills' *The Japan Times Online*, 6 May, 2001.

The language of neoliberal restructuring in the education reform debate clearly began to emerge during the premiership of Yasuhiro Nakasone (1984–1987). Despite Nakasone's ultra-conservative, nationalist credentials,³⁴ this period was commonly referred to in Japan as the 'Ron and Yasu' era as a result of the apparent warmth and rapport that existed between Nakasone and US president Ronald Reagan. We can observe the influence of both Reaganomics and Thatcherism in Nakasone's position on education reform. Nakasone argued in terms of a 'decentralized system of diverse public schools coupled with a larger private sector to promote "individuality, individual dignity, freedom, autonomy and responsibility."³⁵ Soon after his election in 1984, Nakasone established the Ad Hoc Committee on Education Reform, over which he held considerable influence.³⁶ The Committee took three years to propose seven key reforms, by which time Nakasone's tenure was almost at an end, and only three watered-down proposals were eventually implemented.

The strongest calls for progressive education reform have come from through the big business representative Keidanren (National Federation of Employers' Associations), whose calls for reform have included the introduction of a multi-tracking school system in an effort to make education more vocationally relevant.³⁷ Moves towards implementing changes to the education system mirror those in the Western democracies.

With particular relevance to the university sector, in 1993 *Monbusho* (the Ministry of Education, now renamed *Monbukagakusho*) formally announced the following series of initiatives in order to revitalise the sector and to make it more relevant to the country's needs: simplifying and broadening the National Standards for the Establishment of Universities; introducing a system of self-monitoring and self-evaluation of universities; development of structures to facilitate life-long learning programs and development of appropriate (new) means of delivery; greater flexibility in access to and length of graduate programs; improved infrastructure, increased staffing levels, and increased funding of educational and research programs; improved assistance programs for graduate students; doubling of graduate school enrolments by 2000.³⁸

³⁴ One of Nakasone's first acts was to initiate formal visits by serving prime ministers to the shrine of remembrance for war dead. Previously, prime ministers visited the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo as private citizens.

³⁵ Marshall, K., *Learning to be Modern: Japanese Political Discourse on Education*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, p. 248.

³⁶ There have been few leaders with Nakasone's power and independent-mindedness since, with the possible exception of the current premier, Junichiro Koizumi, although his ultimate success in overcoming major impediments within the party system, having no factional backing, remains to be seen, but his current public popularity is high.

³⁷ Marshall, 'Learning to be Modern', p. 246.

³⁸ 'Education Export Opportunities: Japan', p. 23.

³⁸ Education Reform Plan for the 21st Century – The Rainbow Plan, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Monbukagakusho, or MEXT), 2001, www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/21plan/010301.htm, March 2001

At the beginning of 2001, *Monbukagakusho*'s broader Education Reform Plan for the 21st Century – nicknamed “The Rainbow Plan” -- was pegged to enter its first stage. The plan has as its objective: 'Revitalizing Schools, Families and Communities: Schools will improve and education will change'. The plan includes:

1. Improving student's basic scholastic proficiency through 'easy to understand classes' by implementing smaller class sizes, equipping classrooms with IT facilities and introducing national academic achievement surveys
2. Encouraging student participation in community services and programs in order to foster a culture of 'open and warm-hearted Japan...'
3. Creating a lower stress learning environment by broadening sporting and cultural experiences and taking measures to deal with problem behaviours...
4. Make schools that can 'be trusted by parents and communities' by implementing school evaluation systems, increasing parental participation on school boards, freer disclosure of information, and developing new schools to cater for the diverse needs of different community groups
5. Train teachers to take responsibility for the quality of education they deliver by establishing awards, bonus and promotion systems for performance (superseding the traditional seniority systems), suspension of incompetent teachers and setting up a system for teachers to get community, 'real world', work experience
6. The 'promotion of the establishment of universities of international standard' by reinforcing the function of universities as the well-spring of future national leaders, establishing competition between universities and granting greater autonomy to national universities so that they can compete in an open market with private institutions, creating a more open academic job market, and tightening systems for the appraisal of academic performance³⁹

A key feature, the introduction of a focus on IT, was mooted as early as 1997, with a proposal to place specific numbers of computers in every public school by 1999, the establishment of a school network program and specialised teacher training programs to deal with the demands of providing IT education. An emphasis was also placed on environment-related education and this objective has appeared repeatedly in *Monbukagakusho* publications.⁴⁰ While the latter objective may well be implemented, efforts to make Japan the leading 'information age' economy by 2005 look overly optimistic. With Korea and Singapore far advanced in implementing IT education programs in schools and in their use of the Internet as both an entertainment and business tool, with the Japanese Government's 2005 targets apparently not underpinned by a coherent strategy, with dramatic skills shortages in the sector, and with many secondary school teachers lacking expertise in the use of computers,⁴¹ it is

⁴⁰ 'Program for Education Reform,' *Monbukagakusho* website, (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english>), October 1997, no page number.

⁴¹ Interview with Mr Jun Matsumoto, lecturer in the History of Education, Showa Women's University, Tokyo, on 19 March, 2001. Mr Matsumoto further comments that more than half of the students under his supervision still prepare major theses

likely that Japan will continue to lag behind other advanced nations who already have a head start in the IT race.

The other features of the 'Rainbow Plan', especially a lower stress learning environment, and an increase in university standards, are both factors underlying the movement of Japanese students abroad. Together with Japan lagging behind other developed countries in entering the 'information age' and the projected demand for employment in this area, there are powerful inducements for young Japanese to study overseas.

Conflicts that Block Reform

Schoppa's description of the Japanese policy-making process as 'immobilism', indicating an inability to 'do more than accommodate competing pressures and effect a "lowest common denominator" compromise between them', provides an acute insight into why reforms in the education sector have been so slow in being implemented, and then are seen as being too little too late.⁴² As conservative voices have opposed changes to the system that would weaken students' identification with their sense of 'Japaneseness' and nationhood, they have as a consequence pushed for reforms that emphasise character-building rather than economic needs. On the left, the Japan Teacher's Union, an organization that was particularly radical and powerful until the early 1970s,⁴³ but still remains very influential today, opposes changes to what they see as an egalitarian system providing equal opportunities for all members of society. Indeed, calls for reform in the education system have been 'seen by the political left as part of "monopoly capitalism's structural reorganization plans" in which business was "advocating their naked excessive demands for labour and profit"'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, as most Japan Teacher's Union members are employed in the public sector, they have been ardently opposed increased funding of the private education sector, a key neoliberal reform. On one issue the two sides have been united: in opposing the Ad Hoc Committee on Education proposal to revive a 1970s recommendation for the introduction of multi-tracking, so that 'students could be tracked earlier in their school careers so that they could develop more skills useful in the job market'.⁴⁵

The general public (parents) have also levelled criticism more recently at the *Monbukagakusho's* gradual move to institute a system of *yutori kyoiku* (loosely translated as 'relaxed education'). The primary complaint as levels of homework,

using long-hand, and for regular essays almost 90 per cent submit papers prepared in long-hand form.

⁴² L. Schoppa, *Education Reform in Japan: A Case of Immobilist Politics* (New York, Routledge 1991), p. 5.

⁴³ According to Marshall, ('Learning to be Modern', p. 208) the main student organization, the radical Zenkyoto dissolved in 1971, and any other activism declined substantially after the end of the Vietnam War. This also coincided with the détente between the US and China and the return of Okinawa to Japanese rule. The Teacher's Union also became stricken with factional infighting and the establishment of a rival organization.

⁴⁴ Marshall, 'Learning to be Modern', p. 244.

⁴⁵ Schoppa, 'Education Reform in Japan', p. 5.

intensity of class room learning and the number of hours spent at school has been reduced, there has not been a consequential change in the examination system. Students are still required to cram knowledge in preparation for examinations as they move through the system. With a reduction in class hours, there has been a proportional increase in the number of hours being spent in *juku* (cram schools).⁴⁶ Objection to the five-day school week, to be fully implemented by 2002, also indicates that many parents work on Saturdays and do not have time to look after children.⁴⁷

Japanese schools have furthermore traditionally taken on the role of providing the site for discipline, socialisation and moral development.⁴⁸ They are venues of character building, since neither teachers nor the government have believed that 'morals could or should be left to the home or church'.⁴⁹ Some parents evidently oppose changes to this system, which would place a greater socialisation role on the family.

Positive Versus Negative Attributes with the Japanese Education System

The Japanese education system is loosely described as a pre-collegiate, production-oriented system.⁵⁰ The nucleus of the system is a 6-3-3-4 structure: 6 years elementary schooling, 3 years junior high school, 3 years senior high school and then 4 years of university study. With its focus on production outcomes, and socialisation, this system formed the backbone of Japan's 'economic miracle'.

Japan continues to boast a high literacy rate, due in no small part to the rote learning of languages in the school system, with a strong emphasis on the systemic learning of the traditional Chinese-derived *kanji* script, and the inordinately large volumes of information Japanese consume on a daily basis, in the form of magazines, newspapers and books.⁵¹

The participation rate in post-secondary education (73 per cent)⁵² is also higher than the OECD average and retention rates at the secondary and tertiary levels have risen in recent years, partly on account of poor economic conditions. Moreover, despite the fact that Japan already boasts an extensive post-secondary trained population, and also despite radically shifting demographics (as we shall explore below), enrolments in higher education increased in the 1990s, with an overwhelming increase in participation by females.⁵³ At the same time, until 1993, there was continuing growth

⁴⁶ Interview with Ms Keiko Nelson-Hashimoto, director Nelson Educational Consultants, Osaka, 18 June, 2001.

⁴⁷ Article title unknown, *Daily Yomiuri*, 21 August, 1997.

⁴⁸ See Robert Cutts, *An Empire of Schools*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 1997.

⁴⁹ Marshall, 'Learning to be Modern', p. 254.

⁵⁰ Mouer and Sugimoto, 'Images of Japanese Society', p. 5

⁵¹ According to Mouer and Sugimoto, the average Japanese spends about 40 minutes per day reading. Mouer and Sugimoto, 'Images of Japanese Society', p. 218.

⁵² Australia International Education Foundation (AIEF): Japan Business Plan, 1996-97, p. 6.

⁵³ The Ministry of Education Report on Fiscal 1997, School Basic Survey, (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english>) states that a report on higher education participation in fiscal 1997 identified increases in the number of students graduating from both

in the number of Japanese universities being established, to a total of 523 in that year.⁵⁴

On the other hand, as the foregoing pages suggest, there is considerable dissatisfaction within the Japanese education system and parts of it are no doubt out of date, and arguably dysfunctional. While its shortcomings are well-known there is a general sense of helplessness about effecting change, linked to the power structures within Japanese society and the conflicts within the educational system. At the same time, however, events outside of Japan are leading to changes within the educational systems of other countries, and Japanese are increasingly aware of these pressures of globalisation, and the disparity between their own educational system and those of other countries. This is a powerful motivation for some Japanese to study abroad.

The Language of Globalisation and Neoliberal Economics

It is difficult to determine where the language of neoliberal (New Right) economics ends and that of globalisation begins, but the neoliberal reforms of the public sector currently being called for in Japan have been proven (by the Western capitalist democracies that initiated these reforms at least a decade before Japan) as catalysts for the conditions that enable globalisation to prosper. While education has become a popular platform for the reform debate, the ruling conservative *Jiminto* (Liberal Democratic Party) puts broader reforms in the following context: '...educational reform is inseparable from the fundamental reforms in five other areas, namely government administration, economic structure, financial system, social welfare system and fiscal structure, and all reforms must be implemented in a united fashion'.⁵⁵ Privatisation of national universities is at the top of the current government's public sector reform agenda.⁵⁶

Indicative of the globalisation process in industry was the massive shift of manufacturing production offshore, prompted by the soaring yen following the Plaza Accord in 1985, contributing significantly to the global movement of capital and labour.⁵⁷ The human dispersal of company staff that followed is, of course, another indicator of the trend towards globalisation, and by 1994, less than ten years after the Accord, 699,895 Japanese lived abroad, representing a 201 percent increase on figures available for 1969.⁵⁸

There has also more recently been an increasing trend amongst younger people to leave Japan either permanently or semi-permanently due to feelings of aimlessness, boredom or general dissatisfaction at home. Many go abroad, initially, to study. It

undergraduate and postgraduate programs: 524,000 students graduated with bachelors degrees, up by over 11,000 on the previous year. By far the greatest increase was in female graduates, making up 10,000 of the increase.

⁵⁴ 'Education Export Opportunities: Japan', p. 22.

⁵⁵ 'Program for Education Reform,' *Monbukagakusho* website, (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english>), October 1997.

⁵⁶ 'Seven points of key reform programs by the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy', *The Nikkei Weekly*," 25 June, 2001, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Befu and Eades, 'Globalization and Social Change', p. 6

⁵⁸ Befu and Eades , 'Globalization and Social Change', p. 25.

appears that the former group – company staff and their families -- tends to orientate itself toward Japan, while a higher proportion of the latter group opt for a more 'international' experience, turning away from Japan and embracing new cultures.

Returning to calls for neoliberal reforms, within the upper echelons of power - the troika of politicians, the bureaucracy and big business - big business has recognised the need for workers 'who are more innovative, efficient, open-minded, and skilled in the latest technology needed for Japan's economic nation-statism.' Calls, therefore, 'for more "creativity", "individuality", "liberalization", "diversification", "flexibility", and "internationalization"' are therefore aimed at restructuring the education system ahead of reforms in other sectors.⁵⁹ Attempts to open Japanese markets to free trade and competition, hallmarks of the economics of globalisation, have met fierce resistance, regardless of progress in this direction in the 1990s – every concession was wrought only following massive pressure, often from the United States.⁶⁰

Globalisation therefore affects Japanese students in a number of ways. On the one hand, they are aware that, increasingly, they may have to work abroad or, at the least, interact more frequently with people from other countries. In this regard both cross-cultural skills and an ability to effectively communicate in English are essential, and it is clear that the Japanese education system is deficient in providing these skills. Hence, some students will choose to gain them abroad. The students who are most directed here would be the higher achievers, namely those who are looking ahead to active participation in a globalised economy.

A second group of Japanese students perceives the same external pressures and internal shortfalls, but makes different decisions. They are faced with a school system that, in many respects, is out of date, and they are aware that external pressures and demanding additional skills. At the same time, however, they cannot (or will not) compete effectively in the Japanese school system, so the decision to go abroad is an easy one to make. Given the hunger for overseas student fees at foreign institutions even the most under-performing student will find a welcoming educational institution abroad.

The Ageing Population as a Force for Change

One of the most significant drivers of reform, if Japan is to tackle this looming educational crisis adequately, is the rapidly aging society, a combination of very high post-war birthrates, the longevity of Japanese people, and declining birthrates (less than 1.4 children per woman of child-bearing age at present). By the middle of this century Japan will have the most aged society in the world, with approximately one in three Japanese being 65 years of age or more. The population by then will have shrunk to about 100 million. As early as 2010, more than 21 per cent of the Japanese

⁵⁹ B. McVeigh in Befu and Eades, 'Globalization and Social Change', p. 87.

⁶⁰ Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's "Big Bang" trade liberalisation initiative in 1996 was seen by many observers as a "back fire", but the surge in corporate takeovers by foreign companies was perceptible and long-time Japan observers and residents remarked on the difficulty of finding expatriate accommodation and international school places afterwards due to the influx of foreign employees and managers of major companies.

population will be aged 65 years or more (as opposed to, for example, 13 per cent in the USA), an increase of six per cent since 1998. By 2025 Japan is projected to have the highest average age in the world.

The declining birth rate has been so rapid that the number of eighteen-year-olds was predicted to decline from two million in 1992 to 1.5 million by 2000, a 25 per cent decrease in just eight years.⁶¹ At the peak of the baby boom in the late 1950s, there were almost 13.5 million elementary school-aged students; by 1997, however, this figure had dropped dramatically: to just four million.⁶²

Implications for industry and the country's economy are enormous and the extent of problem is such that Japan will need foreign workers in the future in order to pay the taxes required to care for the aging society.⁶³ This is one answer to the dilemma and analysts propose it ought to be considered in conjunction with a number of other strategies, including the process already underway to lift the official age of retirement so that people work longer to make up for part of the shortfall.⁶⁴ Another critical requirement for coping with this problem is technological change.⁶⁵ Public support for importing foreign labour is not strong⁶⁶ and it continues to weaken as the number of crimes committed by foreign nationals rises,⁶⁷ but foreign workers will be required in a range of skilled and unskilled fields, including nursing, where working conditions are so poor that the retention of Japanese nurses is extremely difficult.⁶⁸ This leads to the more vital question of how native Japanese human resources are utilised, especially those of women (for whom the 'glass ceiling' remains a significant obstacle).⁶⁹

The Japanese education system, it is claimed, provides an egalitarian opportunity for success, but at the same time, there is enormous disparity between the numbers of women and men ending up in two-year junior colleges (approximately 96 per cent are

⁶¹ 'The Education System and Private Educational Institutions in Japan,' presented by Taura Hiroki, p.8.

⁶² Australian Education International Japan Country Profile - January, 2001
<http://aei.detya.gov.au/subscribers/marketinfo/NthAsia/Japan/CP/JapCP0106.htm>.

⁶³ Befu and Eades, 'Globalization and Social Change', p. 2.

⁶⁴ Andressen, *A Short History of Japan: From Samurai to Sony*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002 (forthcoming), chapter 9, p.3.

⁶⁵ As we have seen, there is little room for confidence in the Japanese government's attempts to advance expertise in the IT sector at the school level; however, it must be acknowledged that it is accelerating a number of programs and building upon 'traditional strengths in engineering, electronics and materials, and this is being increasingly supplemented by research in pharmaceutical and other areas of biotechnology', all of which should contribute to coping with the 'greying society' and the reduction in supply of labour as a consequence. See 'Education Export Opportunities: Japan', p. 21.

⁶⁶ 'Special report/Gaikokujin (1)/ Time to open the floodgates?: Japan rethinks foreign labor', *Daily Yomiuri Online*, 5 October, 2001.

⁶⁷ 'Workers from Abroad', *Japan Inc.*, June, 2001, pp. 68-69.

⁶⁸ Data delivered to Japanese medical services professionals at a May, 1993 'Australian medical services' seminar in Tokyo.

⁶⁹ 'Glass ceiling in Japan as thick as ever', *The Japan Times Online*, 6 October, 2001.

women), and between the genders in the majors they choose in university.⁷⁰ Statistics showing very low university entry rates for women vary significantly from OECD averages.⁷¹ The way in which women are socialised leaves little space for developing career paths and goals, and certainly there continues to be discrimination in the fields and levels of education that women are encouraged to pursue. One option for coping with the labour force decline as a result of the aging population would be changing the role of women in the workforce, which in turn means overhauling the way in which women are socialised and educated.⁷² Major changes would also be required in the form of support services for mothers, such as child care and maternity leave, and also men's roles in the home would need to be reevaluated.⁷³ This imperative contrasts dramatically with a recent United Nations showing that Japanese women are actually falling behind other countries in terms of being able to participate in economic and social activities.⁷⁴

If anything positive can be said about Japan's 'greying society', it is that during times of economic downturn unemployment may be ameliorated by the labour shortage. Currently, unemployment is running just below 5 per cent,⁷⁵ but it is thought that if Japan's birth rate had not declined so quickly this figure would be much higher.⁷⁶ However, the crisis is enormous and the consequences for Japanese society may be overwhelming. Education, globalisation and the reassessment of women's roles in society are all going to be central to its outcomes.

Changes in Hiring Practices

An overseas degree has until recently been seen as an impediment to securing work in one of Japan's larger, prestigious companies. There have however recently been more stories emerging about major corporations employing graduates of overseas universities (most often from the US), but these are still anomalies.⁷⁷ Often these individuals are exceptionally bright and have majored in a specific skill area that is valuable to large companies.⁷⁸ Furthermore, these employees, especially those whose roles include dealing with Japanese clients, would be required to demonstrate the ability to behave according to certain norms of Japanese business and

⁷⁰ Marshall, 'Learning to be Modern', p. 252.

⁷¹ 'Education Indicators: education at a glance 2001,' OECD website: <http://www.oecd.org/els/education/ei/eag/chC.htm>

⁷² Andressen, *A Short History of Japan*, chapter 9 p. 3.

⁷³ Andressen 'A Short History of Japan', chapter 9 p. 3.

⁷⁴ The study's 'gender empowerment measure' showed that Japan has slipped from 38th to 41st according to the 'FY 2000 Annual Report on the State of Forming a Gender-equal Society'. In 'Japanese Women Falling Behind in Public Life', *The Daily Yomiuri*, 24 June, 2001, p. 2.

⁷⁵ 'Reform Package Details Hardship on Horizon', *Nikkei Weekly*, 16 June, 2001.

⁷⁶ Befu and Eades, 'Globalization and Social Change', p. 3.

⁷⁷ Interview with Ms Yoshiko Fujinobe, Executive Officer, Counselling, ICS Inc., Tokyo, 22 June, 2001.

⁷⁸ A good example would be, say, a graduate with expertise in US tax law, which would be an asset to a trading house such as Marubeni Corporation.

communications.⁷⁹ One recent survey of qualities companies look for in new recruits puts 'character' in the most important slot, a category which appears to encompass the ability to work with colleagues and deal with customers in a 'Japanese manner', the recruit should not have lost this during his or her sojourn abroad.⁸⁰

Some companies, however, are altering recruitment practices, particularly organizations like Sony that rely on a creative and technologically innovative workforce to maintain a competitive edge in the electronics and computer graphics markets: of Sony's approximately 100 new recruits in 1999, only 25 per cent were graduates of Japanese universities with no overseas experience; 75 per cent either graduated from a foreign university or had some overseas study experience.⁸¹ Foreign companies, like Goldman Sachs (the US financial house), recruit from two pools into two separate business divisions. On the one hand, Goldman's Tokyo office sources staff for their 'back room' support areas, particularly IT divisions, primarily from a pool of overseas university graduates – either Japanese nationals with degrees from overseas universities, foreign nationals with Japanese-speaking skills, and *nissei* or *sansei* (second or third generation foreign nationals of Japanese descent). On the other hand, in recruiting staff for their sales divisions and other management roles that require regular interaction with Japanese clients, Goldmans prefers Japanese nationals who have graduated from prestigious Japanese universities, such as Tokyo University (*Todai*), Kyoto University (*Kyodai*), etc., in order to satisfy client expectations.⁸² This preference for graduates from brand-name Japanese universities is still very much the norm in the public sector, and in 1995 seventy percent of entrants to the nine top ministries were *Todai* graduates; in the case of the Ministry of Finance the proportional intake of *Todai* graduates was 90 percent.⁸³

The enduring disparity between hiring of males and females into professional jobs should also be noted. Male and female wage differentials continue to be an issue in the workforce,⁸⁴ so that in addition to being segmented by age and education attainment, labour has been segmented by gender.⁸⁵ That there were twice as many Japanese female students as males in Australia in the mid-1990s reflected the situation in which it is harder for males to break the study-career pattern, while women face more pressure to marry and also face unattractive career options.⁸⁶ There is strong

⁷⁹ Interview with Ms Kyomi Kumehara and Ms Makiko Kashikura, senior consultants at Education Information Consultants, Tokyo, 12 June, 2001.

⁸⁰ Kumehara and Kashikura, 'Interview', citing an April, 2001, Recruit Corporation report to employers.

⁸¹ Interview with Ms Yoshiko Fujinobe, Executive Officer, Counselling, ICS Inc., Tokyo, 22 June, 2001.

⁸² Interview with Mr Andrew Le Lievre, senior consultant, human resource division, Goldman Sachs, Tokyo, 16 June, 2001.

⁸³ R. McGregor, *Japan Swings: Politics, Culture and Sex in the New Japan*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1996, p. 120.

⁸⁴ Mouer and Sugimoto, 'Images of Japanese Society', p. 349.

⁸⁵ Francks, *Japanese economic Development: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 235.

⁸⁶ Andressen, 'Escape from Affluence', p. 9.

evidence to suggest that this is changing, as more males choose not to climb onto the life-long employment/career ladder.⁸⁷

Internationalisation Within the Japanese Education System

In 1983 there were approximately 10,000 foreign students in Japan. In that year the Japanese Government, as a reflection of its new *kokusaika* (internationalisation) policy, initiated a plan to have 100,000 foreign students in Japan by year 2000. The proposal suggested that international exchanges of students 'help raise the level of education and studies both in Japan and foreign countries, foster and promote the spirit of international mutual understanding and friendship and aid in cooperation with developing countries in the development of human resources'.⁸⁸ By 1993 there were 52,405 students from 120 countries studying in Japan (although most were from Asian countries) and in that year the Japanese Government expanded the number of venues where 'Study in Japan' fairs were held, increased the size of *Monbusho* Scholarships, sought to reduce tuition fees for privately-financed foreign students, made provision for new scholarship schemes, and planned to construct modern accommodation facilities for foreign students.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, for most of the following six years the number of foreign students studying in Japan stagnated at around 55,000 (indeed, the increase between 1994 and 1995 was only 60 students, or 0.1 per cent)⁹⁰ before jumping to 64,011 in 2000, a 14.8 per cent (8,256) increase from the previous year.⁹¹ (It ought also be noted that Japan counts 10,712 (1996 figures) ethnic Korean and Chinese long-term residents in Japan - often second or third generation - as international students).⁹²

One participant in the June 2001 Japanese Education Exhibition series in Malaysia and Indonesia commented on this deficiency and further noted that: 'They [Japanese institutions], seem not to have a clear, rational or comprehensive view of how to restructure their education and offerings to achieve their desired goals. Consequently, I do not expect them to come up with any effective counter-measures in the near

⁸⁷ Responding to a series of interview questions delivered by the international education recruitment company International Cross-cultural Committee, 547 scholarship applicants (40 per cent of whom were male) unanimously replied that they would prefer to change jobs every three years than stay with one company for life. (Interview with Mr Yasuo Sone, director ICC) Furthermore, those attending professional job fairs, regardless of the tight job market, decreased by 40 per cent in 2000 compared to the previous year. (Interview with Ms Makiko Kashikura and Ms Kyomi Kumehara, EDIC 'Interview').

⁸⁸ A. Inoue, 'Japanese Ministry of Education's Policy Toward Foreign Student Exchange,' Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, publication date unknown, but assumed to be 1994, p.4.

⁸⁹ Inoue 'Japanese Ministry of Education's Policy', pp. 1 – 10.

⁹⁰ 'Survey on Foreign Students for Academic 1995,' Monbukagakusho website, (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/1996/04/960403.htm>)

⁹¹ Interview with Ms Melanie Brock, Director, UMAP International Secretariat, Tokyo, 24 June, 2001.

⁹² Australia International Education Foundation (AIEF), Japan Business Plan, 1996-97, p. 14.

future'.⁹³ The urgency with which Japanese institutions need to be tackling the dilemma of the declining birth rate, and the importance of attracting overseas students, is brought into sharp focus thus: 'They [the institutions] are simply running scared, both as individual institutions and in the bureaucracy, of the demographic time bomb that will explode in a few years when the number of university age youth peaks and they are then left with massive over-capacity. The social implications of collapsing universities and large numbers of unemployed staff are giving both universities and the government the chills, but not effectively concentrating their minds to work out practical solutions'.⁹⁴

Hence, in spite of the pressing need to attract more international students, and efforts made in this regard, the number of foreigners in Japan's educational system remains woefully low. For Japanese students wanting exposure to the international environment at home, through their educational institutions, the possibilities are limited. A period of study abroad remains, therefore, a favoured alternative.

Conclusion

There are clearly a broad range of factors that influence the decision to study abroad and those we have explored identify: conflicts that contribute to dissatisfaction with the constraints of Japanese society, unease with the rate of change (either too slow or too fast) and its negative symptoms, and the inability of the education system to meet personal and economic needs and goals. Reforms in the public sector have been slow in coming and in the education precinct opposing political voices in the 1980s and 1990s slowed the pace of reform to the point of virtual 'immobilism'. Japan has failed miserably in its plan to attract 100,000 foreign students by the year 2000,⁹⁵ it is falling behind the developed world in its use of new technologies in schools, and seems to be taking few concrete steps to deal with the looming 'greying society' crisis. Neoliberal economics forms the basis of the language of reform, and Japan was one of the first countries to globalise its industries, on the back of a strong currency, although this shift has not been accompanied by common free-market principles, and trade liberalisation has been strenuously fought.

Young Japanese today are perhaps the embodiment of the penetration of a global culture. They are keen and regular travellers, they are an enormous force as a study abroad market, and they are acutely aware (as are their parents) that English skills are essential to success in a local work environment with global interests.⁹⁶ Furthermore, travel and study are fuelling a desire to internationalise, to become *kokusaijin* (or

⁹³ Interview with Dr Roderick Kaim, Associate Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Tokyo a participant in the Japanese Education Exhibition series, June, 2001.

⁹⁴ Interview with Dr Roderick Kaim, Associate Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Tokyo a participant in the Japanese Education Exhibition series, June, 2001.

⁹⁵ Japan receives just 3 per cent of the world's international student body, while countries like Australia, with less than one-twentieth the number of universities than Japan, attracts 8 per cent according to OECD statistics.

⁹⁶ There is also a slowly emerging recognition of the need for English skills in order to exploit e-commerce opportunities.

'international people') and to become members of the global community (or at least to escape from Japan for a time). Whilst overseas education exporters can expect interest in their offerings to rise, both off-shore and increasingly through distance and online delivery, it remains to be seen if the younger generation can drive the change required to head off a number of looming crises as most economic and social indicators point towards dark times ahead. Political apathy, a lack of will to reform, an ageing population and a growing self-centred youth are not positive portents for the 21st Century. The education system, it seems, once more holds the key to Japan's future.