

The next 5 (years)

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There is no doubt that today is an era of *unpredictability* in which conventional methodologies are no longer applicable.

The past five years have been marked by rapid and forceful digitalization of society as a whole - with the spread of COVID-19, as well as technological innovation through generative AI and other means since 2022. The keyword “VUCA” is often used to symbolize these times. VUCA stands for “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous,” and refers to a rapidly changing and unpredictable situation. The term was coined from the first letters of the four English words “volatility,” “uncertainty,” “complexity,” and “ambiguity,” and has attracted attention since the World Economic Forum held in 2016, when the modern world was described as a “VUCA world”.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has therefore indicated that it aims to educate students to “become creators of the future in an era of unpredictability,” and that it is imperative to develop human resources who can respond to changes in society. MEXT is considering necessary measures towards the year 2030 based five cross-cutting perspectives (1). The following paragraphs present my personal views on the five basic policies for Japan's future education policy by MEXT and my predictions on their future development.

Developing human resources for a brighter future: Human resources to initiate and create changes and new values through leadership in various fields in society

The number of Japanese students studying abroad at Japanese universities has fallen from approximately 100,000 in FY 2019 to 60,000 in FY 2022, because of the impact of the COVID-19, and is still far behind the number of students who studied abroad before the COVID-19. Various factors can be cited, including the delay in finding employment in Japan, the inward-looking attitude of young people, and language skills, but it is also thought that the record depreciation of the Japanese yen and rising prices outside of Japan are having a major impact on the increase in the burden of financing study abroad. This situation applies not only to university students but also to high school students.

Japan has a rapidly aging population with a declining birthrate, and the relative position of the Japanese market in the global economy is shrinking. Therefore, to achieve further economic growth, Japan needs global human resources to develop overseas markets. Japan's Immigration and Residency Management Agency has introduced the Japan System for Special Highly Skilled Professionals (J-Skip) (2), which provides preferential residency status to foreigners with highly specialized skills, but this has not had a significant impact on Japan's globalization. For Japan to further globalize, it is necessary to create an environment in which the next generation of Japanese children can learn and take on the challenges of a globalized society.

MEXT is promoting scholarship-based study abroad programs and aims to increase the overall number of Japanese students studying abroad to 500,000 by FY 2033(3). However, the development of global human resources will require not only study abroad, but also the

¹ <https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/lawandplan/title01/detail01/sdetail01/1373808.htm>

² <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001401537.pdf>

³ <https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/highered/title02/detail02/1373921.html>

creation of online “opportunities” in Japan to provide more opportunities for more students to experience the world. In addition, students should not only focus on learning English - but should also listen to stories of people who are active overseas, thereby creating opportunities to learn about the current situation in other countries as well as acquiring a rich culture.

Japan is also promoting STEM education. A 21st century education system, that aims to produce internationally competitive human resources - that can adapt to an IT and global society. However, the system has not been deployed nationwide due to a delay in the use of ICT, a lack of teachers capable of teaching, and disparities among families and regions. Programming has been made mandatory for high school students to improve their information literacy and technology, but it is difficult for students to acquire such skills in one year of high school. Therefore, a curriculum that begins from elementary school to develop ICT skills may be necessary.

Building safety nets for learning: A wide range of learning opportunities accessible to everyone

In Japan, the number of truancy cases in compulsory education institutions (elementary and junior high schools) has skyrocketed to about 300,000, five times that of 10 years ago in elementary schools and more than double in junior high schools. The situation is similar in high schools, where the number of truant students has been growing for 11 consecutive years.

The main reason for this is the rapid change in the educational environment, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where school events are no longer held and time spent at home is rapidly increasing and causing a great deal of stress. In addition, as children's difficulties become more diverse and complex, the number of children who do not fit into the current uniform and rigid school education system unique to Japan is also increasing.

MEXT will compile the COCOLO Plan ⁽⁴⁾ in 2023, which aims to promote mutual understanding and cooperation among schools, local communities, families, NPOs, and free schools, as well as the government, to promote initiatives for children in their respective fields.

In other words, it is presumed that it will become important to create an environment where anyone can learn freely, when and where they want to learn. Therefore, it will be necessary to collaborate with free schools and set up places within schools where students can study in a calm and individualized manner. Furthermore, it will be necessary to provide a variety of places for learning, such as online wide-area support and evening junior high schools, where students do not have to go to school “physically”.

Building bonds and establishing vibrant communities: A virtuous circle where society nurtures people and people create society

It has been pointed out that the concept of “local schools” and “children raised in the community” is gradually disappearing in Japan as the urbanization and depopulation of the countryside, changing family patterns, and diversifying lifestyles have led to a weakening of ties and mutual support in local communities. Education does not simply take place in schools alone. The healthy development of children is impossible without the family and local community functioning adequately as a place of education. In particular, the number of

⁴ https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/lawandplan/20240311-ope_dev03-1.pdf

dual-earner households has increased 1.5-fold from FY 2001 to FY 2021, and the number of nuclear families continues to increase, with nearly 90% of all families with children now being nuclear families ⁽⁵⁾.

MEXT aims to enhance recurrent education through cooperation between universities and industry, and to improve local educational capabilities by promoting cooperation and collaboration among schools, families, and communities ⁽⁶⁾. In addition to afterschool and childcare services for elementary school children only, it will be urgently required to expand and improve environments (such as community centres and community schools) where experienced and knowledgeable elderly people, especially those over 65 years of age, can look after children. In addition, in regions with declining birth rates, it is imperative to create an environment where not only universities, but also junior high schools and high schools, can build vertical and horizontal ties that transcend the boundaries of the school and help students acquire social skills.

In an increasingly complex society, there is a need for an environment in which specialized fields that cannot be solved by teachers or local communities alone can be easily searched for and utilized online.

Developing social competencies for survival: Independence and collaboration in a diversified and rapidly changing society

In response to the rapid spread of online education, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Japanese government has decided to provide all elementary and junior high school students with one computer or tablet per student in 2021. Since some families do not have internet access, the Japanese government is also supporting the provision of high-speed, high-capacity telecommunications networks within all elementary, junior high, and high schools. MEXT is also promoting the enhancement of learning not only in terms of hardware, but also in terms of software, such as digital teaching materials and learning activities that effectively utilize ICT. MEXT is promoting the “GIGA School Program” ⁽⁷⁾, which aims to complete the distribution of one terminal per student and the development of a communication environment by 2025, as well as to enhance education using ICT.

For children living in the Society 5.0 era, effective use of ICT-based cutting-edge technologies in education is required, while at the same time, since the improvement of teachers' skills has lagged, it will be essential to improve the ICT skills of all teachers to improve classes and work efficiency. Therefore, it will be necessary to provide online and on-demand training programs for teachers. In addition to the use of digital technology, face-to-face activities are also indispensable, and it will be necessary to construct an appropriate combination of these activities according to the learning situation. Furthermore, it is essential for children, who were born in an information society and will grow up in an ever-evolving IT society, to learn about digital ethics from elementary school age. Since most children use the Internet and SNS in private environments, such as at home, rather than at school, it will be necessary for schools and parents to cooperate in providing education that focuses on fostering moral awareness and compliance with “ethics in the information society” and “understanding and obeying the law”.

⁵<https://www.mext.go.jp/en/publication/whitepaper/title03/detail03/sdetail03/sdetail03/1372941.htm>

⁶<https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/lawandplan/title01/detail01/sdetail01/1373804.htm>

⁷ https://www.mext.go.jp/en/content/20200716-mxt_kokusai-000005414_04.pdf

Setting up the infrastructure and dialoguing to ensure the effectiveness of the plan

According to TALIS' 2018 survey ⁽⁸⁾, the average time spent on teacher administrative work in the countries participating in the survey was 2.7 hours per week. In contrast, Japanese teachers devoted 5.2 hours to administrative work at elementary schools and 5.6 hours at junior high schools. In addition, various non-teaching duties exist, such as advising club activities, making long working hours a problem. In addition, the ratio of teachers hired has fallen sharply from 13.3 times in FY 2000 to 3.9 times in FY 2021, making it difficult to maintain the quality of teaching staff.

MEXT aims to promote flexible work styles and improve the fixed number of teachers to reduce workload and long working hours. However, it is unlikely that the workload of teachers will decrease dramatically in an increasingly complex society. Therefore, cloud computing should enable teachers and staff to securely access the school business system and perform their duties not only in the school but also from home or on business trips. In addition, for specialized classes that require small-group instruction and individualized instruction, it will be necessary to request external instructors whose expertise is sufficiently high. At the present, we are requesting some of our English classes to be taught by people from overseas, but this is not only for foreign language education, but also for DX and various other tasks, and early action is also required to address this issue. Furthermore, in Japan, where regional disparities in education are an issue, local governments are expected to collaborate with well-known private schools in urban areas to offer high-quality classes through “online interactive classes” utilizing IT.

Society and Children's Future in 2030

In Japanese education, based on the social and cultural background of Japan, we must harmoniously and integrally nurture acquisitive elements such as self-affirmation and self-realization, and cooperative elements such as human connection, altruism, and a sense of social contribution, to improve well-being based on “harmony and cooperation” that is rooted in Japanese society through education ⁽⁹⁾. We are required to do this through education. To enhance children's well-being it is important to improve the well-being of teachers and the school, including the families and communities that support them. This expansion will support a diverse range of individuals - and can realize an ideal form of intergenerational circulation in the future. To this end, promoting investment in education as an “investment in the future,” improving the quality of education, as well as community cooperation, is essential.

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⁸ <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/talis.html>

⁹ https://www.mext.go.jp/en/unesco/title04/detail04/20220706-mxt_kouhou02-1.pdf