



Today's Goals for Education Reform (Summary)

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All through the ages, nations facing crossroads or striving toward a better future invariably emphasize the importance of education. Japan is one such nation that has historically valued education.

I A brief history of education in Japan

During the Nara Period (710-794), national universities for aristocrats were established in the capital and universities for local overlords' children in provincial regions. In the Heian Period (828), Kukai, Kobo Daishi opened a private educational institution for Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist teachings that accepted common people. Japan continued to value education in every period thereafter. In the Edo Period, domain public schools for warriors, who were the ruling class, and temple schools and/or small private elementary schools named *Terakoya* for common people were set up all over the nation to teach reading, writing and calculation. *Terakoya* schooling was a pride of Japan and later became the basis of our national education system.

The first education reform

The education law was implemented in 1872, and a basic school system compatible with the demands of the nation and societal development was launched in 1855. This process in the Meiji Period was Japan's first major education reform.

The second education reform

The second major reform was the introduction of a new school system after World War II. Japan initiated a 6-3-3-4 (years of elementary, junior high, high school, and university) school system uniformly across the nation. This single-track system, which replaced the multiple-track system, still continues today. The principles of gender equality and an open school system have contributed to the development of a vibrant, quality workforce for Japan.

These two cardinal reforms were implemented in line with the dynamic transformation of Japan's national structure.

Today's need for education reform

There are three stimuli for today's movement toward education reform:

- 1) Rapid depopulation due to low birth rates. We must help our children acquire the ability to think and act for themselves in this new environment.
- 2) The world is facing the tides of globalization. Skills to thrive in the global age are essentials that children of the future must acquire.
- 3) Japan is currently facing the challenges of an enormous budget deficit and increasing social security costs. Passion and enthusiasm to overcome such problems, as well as creativity, innovative power and the ability to assume responsibility in the international community are important attributes of human resources that we must endeavor to develop through education.

II Current elementary and junior high school education

The purpose of compulsory education is to form children's views and attitudes through intellectual, moral and physical education and ultimately to develop good citizens.

In April 2001, I was unexpectedly appointed Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. *Yutori kyoiku* had been set to begin exactly one year later, making caring citizens strongly concerned about the possible deterioration of our children's academic ability. To improve the situation, I issued a ministerial authorization to enable schools and education boards to take individual measures to assure basic academic levels appropriate to their goals, specifically suggesting possible actions to prevent "relaxation" from becoming "laxity".

This appeal encouraged schools to make their own efforts and later the Ministry to revise its guidelines for a richer education. The improvement was evident in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Future challenges in elementary and junior high schools

One challenge is that current education fosters a passive attitude in students: while they are good at learning what they are taught, they tend to lack the ability to think for themselves, identify problems, and take action to solve them. In addition, they need to learn how to express their opinions.

Also, the appreciation of nature, art and traditional Japanese culture as well as learning through experiences, including work experiences, are extremely important.

III Challenges in high school education

In contrast to our world-class compulsory education, our upper secondary education has suffered an accumulation of unsolved problems such as gaps in educational content and level among schools, failure to achieve curricula, and lack of collaboration with tertiary institutions.

It is alarming that our students cannot receive the education they need during this crucial period in their lives when their minds are formative.

Review of high school education content and cooperation with universities

There is concern that students in high-ranked schools spend too much of their time studying hard and competing in entrance examinations. Recently, there have been discussions on reforming three challenges integrally—high school education content, the role and management of university education, and university entrance screening—to establish high school and university liaison for the new era. I have high expectations for this prospect.

IV University reform

As the ultimate stage of a nation's education system, tertiary institutions are extremely important for their students and the nation.

Japanese universities: history and issues

As our modern university system started in the Meiji Period from Tokyo Imperial University, which was established on the model of German universities, it tends to focus on academic pursuit led by dominant professors.

After World War II, universities and colleges were integrated under the new system as *shinsei daigaku*. However, the schools retained much of their former character and were far from realizing the new policies placing importance on modern education.

Tides of university reform

There have been successive tides of university reform since the 1990s. The ideal direction of reform was promulgated in excellent reports reflecting the opinions of universities. Some universities took this opportunity to reform themselves.

In the late 1980s, I as a ministry department manager took part in establishing the University Council and supervised the reforms as the director general in the early 1990s. At the outset of the 21st century, I was appointed Minister of Education to lead the major reform of incorporating our national universities. I am a supporter of the view that university reform is the essence of quality improvement in Japanese education.

University reform driven by incorporation of national universities

When arguments about privatizing national universities occurred, we made the bold decision to convert them to corporate entities capable of autonomous management in order to revitalize them. University incorporation has been called the greatest reform since the establishment of *shinsei daigaku* because of its significant impact.

While some universities have taken this opportunity to reform themselves fundamentally, others have lagged behind or have made no apparent changes because of their conservatism. However, the changing times will leave every university no choice but to reform itself as demanded by its mission.

Here are some major issues and viewpoints toward reforms in Japanese universities:

- 1) Improvement in quality of university education, 2) Leadership of president, 3) President selection, 4) Employment, salaries, and role of faculties, 5) Enhancement of research, development and innovation capability, 6) Promotion of industry-university collaboration and establishment of system to raise funds from private sector, 7) Enhancement of university's social contribution, 8) Fundamental reform of postgraduate education, 9) Enhancement of student exchange programs.

V Conclusion

Here are three points we should keep in mind regarding education reform:

- 1) Good education requires appropriate personnel and infrastructure as well as financial support. According to an OECD study, the Japanese government budget (as a percentage of GDP) allocated for elementary and junior high school education, which is highly evaluated globally, is the second lowest among its member states. Both government and private sectors should understand that adequate financial support is essential.
- 2) The youth of the future should have wide perspectives of the world, the courage to go abroad, and ambitious goals in global activities. I hope that as many high school and university students as possible are able to gain experience overseas and that their schools will support them.
- 3) Universities should initially lead reform. They must take this opportunity to implement fundamental reforms, clarifying their own goals and reform targets. I want the universities and their faculties and administrators, as leaders of reform, to take on these challenges with a solid philosophy of how our nation should stand in the future.

Author profile: Atsuko Toyama

1962: Graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Tokyo and joined the Ministry of Education.

Her titles were always prefixed by “the first female”. After managing four departments in the ministry, including the Junior High School Department, she became General Manager of the Cultural Affairs Department, Deputy Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, Director General of the Education Aid Bureau, Director General of the Higher Education Bureau, and the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs.



1996: Japanese Ambassador to the Republic of Turkey
2000: Director General of the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo.
April 2001–September 2003: Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology for the Koizumi Cabinet
April 2004–March 2011: President, the New National Theatre Foundation
April 2004–June 2015: President, the Panasonic Education Foundation (formerly the Matsushita Education Foundation)
During her presidency, launched “Kokoro wo Hagukumu Sogo Forum (Forum for Integrated Mind Education)” in April 2005 and issued a proposal paper on education at home, at school and in the community in January 2007.

March 2007–present: President, Toyota Foundation.

Also currently President of the Japan Ikebana Arts Association and Chief Director of the National Council on Fujisan World Heritage

2013: Received the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun

Main publications:

“Turkey: at the crossroads of the century” (Istanbul : Doğuş Grubu İletişim Yayıncılık ve Ticaret)

“Ko kawaru gakko, ko kawaru daigaku” (Kodansha)

“Koshikata no ki—Hitosuji no michi wo ayunde 50 nen” (Kamakura Shunjusha)

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