Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Japan

Update by Kumiko Tsukamoto – March 2016

Context and recent trends

In Japan, parents and students traditionally place higher value on academic education compared to vocational education. Hence, vocational education is often considered a second option after university for students with lower grades and/or students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Since the 1980s, the number of universities in Japan has grown dramatically, to almost 800. Enrolments have grown over that period, but many universities (particularly private institutions and those in regional areas) now face serious financial and demographic pressures.

More recently, due to changes in industry and in the skills required for work, vocational education and training institutions, especially the specialised courses at professional training colleges ("senmon gakko") have been gaining in popularity. Enrolments in these courses are now growing after a period of continuous decline. Vocational schools are attracting not only senior secondary school graduates but also university graduates who were not successful in securing employment upon graduation.

At the same time, Japanese companies are making significant changes to their operations. In 2014-15 for the first time, Japanese listed companies made more of their profits offshore than domestically. Companies have also reduced funding for in-house training programs and are looking to do more externally.

Japanese vocational schools are now also attracting more international students. In 2014, about 16% of the total number of students studying at vocational schools were from overseas, mainly from the Asian region. The number of VET students from Japan studying in Australia is now also increasing again after a period of decline – this mirrors the broader trend in the number of Japanese students heading overseas.

As the VET system, especially professional training colleges (which are not "ichijo-ko"[1]), does not currently have an established quality assurance framework, these schools often do not receive appropriate valuation from society. In addition, pathways from vocational schools to universities are still not well developed. Only 2% of Japanese university entrants are aged over 25 (compared to the OECD average of 18%). The barriers to mature-aged entry reduce mobility and opportunity for re-skilling and life-long learning. Currently, about 20% of students in the senior secondary education are studying at vocational schools. However, only 20% of these students go to universities. Hence, offering wider opportunities for further education is one of the challenges the Japanese government is facing.

Responsibility for Japan's VET sector

Responsibility for the provision and supervision of Japan's VET sector mostly rests with two ministries – the Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (WHLW). MEXT has responsibility for general comprehensive school education, which includes some vocational schools such as colleges of technology, and specialised upper secondary schools. MHLW is principally responsible for public vocational training and the administration of trade skill and qualification tests. In addition, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) offers career education in the school and higher education sectors to improve students' job readiness.

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[1] The *School Education Law*, Article 1, lists formally recognised education institutions ("ichijo-ko" or Article 1 schools). The framework for these schools is stipulated in the Law and these institutions need to follow curriculum guidelines developed by MEXT.

Opportunity through learning

To develop better pathways between vocational education and university and also to improve quality of vocational education and training as part of the broader education system, MEXT is implementing new policies and programs and is discussing the establishment of a new type of tertiary education institution in the vocational education sector. These initiatives include:

1. "Professional Universities"

   As close to 20% of university graduates are not able to find stable jobs, the government is actively considering the establishment of a new type of higher education institution to develop job-ready graduates. Currently, the Central Council for Education is discussing a report developed by MEXT's Council of Advisers and plans to submit a proposal to the Diet sometime in 2016. The issues under discussion include quality assurance, positioning of the institutions, and pathways from vocational schools. The government also wants to provide opportunities to working people to go back to study for improving their skills. It has been suggested that these new institutions should require industry work placements for all students as well as encouraging study abroad.

   The private professional training colleges have a strong voice in the Japanese system and have been arguing for increased funding and prestige, as well as access to government programs (for example to support internationalisation) that have to date only been available for universities. It is expected that some professional training colleges and some private universities would seek to transition to this new model once a new system in place.

   Debate is also underway about whether a new quality assurance agency will be needed to undertake evaluation of new institutions and the VET sector more broadly.

2. Vocational and practical professional courses certified by MEXT

   As a trial to set up a new framework for vocational education, the MEXT Minister now certifies new vocational courses which are practical and are offered in cooperation with industry. In August 2014, 470 schools and 1365 courses were registered under the new rules.

3. Super Professional High (SPH) Schools

   MEXT already provides funding for Super Science High Schools (to focus on STEM education) and Super Global High Schools (to focus on internationalisation and study abroad). The SPH school project was launched in 2015, and the government is providing special funding for 3-5 years to 16 specialised upper secondary schools offering advanced courses in agriculture, technology, commerce, fisheries, domestic science, nursing and welfare. In 2016, 24 schools will be nominated as Super Professional High Schools.

   SPH schools work closely with universities, colleges of technology, research institutes and industry to "deliver practical vocational education in order to develop job-ready professionals for further industry development" for Japan.

Possible next steps and areas of focus

In this context of ongoing education and economic policy reform in Japan, new opportunities are opening up for VET engagement, both at the government-to-government level and also for Australian providers. Future work could be considered in the following areas:

1. Promoting study abroad opportunities for students – increased access to scholarships and loans (including under the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement) and increasing demand in key sectors such as tourism.

2. Opportunities for Australian providers with the creation of new VET institutions in the Japanese system – potential for new partnership models.

3. Engagement with MEXT – on qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, system/curriculum design, and industry engagement.

4. Involving Japan in Australian Government-led international projects on VET and skills – through APEC and EAS (eg. work on regional occupational standards).

Type/name	Specialised Upper Secondary Schools 専門高等学校 (Senmon Kotoh Gakko) 実業高等学校 (Jitsugyo Kotoh Gakko)	College of Technology 高等専門学校	Professional Training College/ Specialised Training College 専修学校	Miscellaneous School 各種学校	Polytechnic University/colleges 職業能力開発大学校
Duration & Qualification	3 years Graduation with a certificate of upper secondary education	5 years Graduation with an associate degree →Possible to transfer to a university 2 years (additional) Possible to obtain a bachelor's degree *A student needs to pass the review process by the NIAD-UE to obtain a degree	Upper secondary course: 3 years Graduation with a certificate equivalent to upper secondary education certificate *Schools with this course are called 高等専修学校 (Kotoh Senshu Gakko) Specialised course: 2 or 4 years a. 2 years Graduation with a Diploma →Possible to enter third year at universities b. 4 years Graduation with an Advanced Diploma →Possible to enter a graduate school *Schools with this course are called 専門学校 (Senmon Gakko) Note: General course (education other than the two courses above) is also offered *Duration of the courses & certificate/degrees which can be obtained are not specified	More than 1 year (more than 3 months and less than 1 year for some courses) Certificate/degree: not specified	Undergraduate courses: 4 years Graduation with bachelor's degrees Specialised courses: 2 years Graduation with master's degrees Note: There are other courses offered up to one year, to nurture teachers to work at Polytechnic colleges.
Admission requirements	Completion of junior secondary education or equivalent	Completion of junior secondary education or equivalent	1. Upper secondary course: Completion of junior secondary education or equivalent 2. Specialised course: Completion of upper secondary course at Specialised Training College or completion of upper secondary education 3. General course: not specified	not specified	For undergraduate: Completion of upper secondary education or equivalent For Specialised course: Completion of undergraduate course
School number	Total: 2,314 (in 2015) Specialised Upper Secondary Schools: 1,398 Specialised courses at general upper secondary schools: 916	Total: 57 (in 2015) National: 51 Public: 3 Private: 3	Total: 3,201 (in 2015) National: 9 Public: 193 Private: 2,999	Total: 1,229 (in 2015) Public: 6 Private: 1,223	Polytechnic University: 1 Polytechnic College: 10

Opportunity through learning

Student number	Total: 618,826 (in 2015) (18.7 % in upper secondary education)	Total: 57,611 (in 2015) By institution type National: 51,615 Public: 3,778 Private: 2,218 By program Basic program: 54,391 Advanced program: 3,220	Total: 656,106 By course Upper secondary course: 40,095 Specialised course: 588,183 General course: 27,828 in 2015	Total: 117,727 (in 2015) By institution type Public: 585 Private: 117,142	Total: 4,475 (in 2015) By program UG courses at Polytechnic University: 160 PG courses at Polytechnic University: 160 Specialised course at Polytechnic College: 3,620 Advanced course at Polytechnic College: 1,535
Major fields	Major fields: Engineering Commerce Agriculture Home economics Nursing Welfare Fishery IT	Major fields: Electrical & electronics Mechanical and Health Civil engineering & Architecture Materials Biology	Major fields: Medical Culture and general education Personal care and nutrition Engineering: 12.6 % Commerce Education/Social welfare Fashion/Home economics Agriculture	Major fields: Assistant nursing Cooking Accounting Dress-making Arts Foreign languages Commerce	Mechanical engineering Electrical engineering Electronics and IT Architecture
Administration	Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau, MEXT	Technical Education Division, Higher Education Bureau	Lifelong Learning Promotion Division, Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, MEXT	Prefectural government/ Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, MEXT	Japan Organization for Employment of the Elderly, Persons with Disabilities and Job Seekers (JEED) (Independent Administrative Agency under MHLW)
Notes	• Schools within the formal school system described in the School Education Law, Article 1. • It also includes specialised courses at general Upper Secondary Schools	• Schools within the formal school system described in the School Education Law, Article 1.	• Schools outside of the formal school system described in the School Education Law, Article 1.	• Schools outside of the formal school system described in the School Education Law, Article 1. • Many International Schools belong to this category.	• Institutions within Article 27 of the Human Resources Development Promotion Law