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The Transition from the Education to the Employment System in Japan – A Balancing Act between Continuity and Change[1]

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Abstract *Japan's 'market model' of vocational training shows continuities and changes: On the one hand it can be stated that the country's transition from the school system into employment remains quite stable. On the other hand, especially demographic, societal and cultural changes lead to a higher academization rate with consequences for the secondary and tertiary vocational training institutions. Even universities and colleges more and more diversify their curricula with vocational compounds such as 'employability', 'vocationalism' and 'career education', trying to cope with less educated youth to ensure a smooth transition into the employment market. Moreover there are recent changes in the recruitment procedures of the companies, such as hiring mid-career employees that might lead to further changes in the ways of Japanese vocational training.*

Title *The Transition from the Education to the Employment System in Japan — a Balancing Act between Continuity and Change*

Keywords *Vocational Training, Secondary and tertiary Instuítutions, Academization, Threshold Concept, Recruitment*

1 Introduction: Cultural background, definitions and questions

"Send them to us 'snow-white', in the company they are 'rightly forged'" (Imai, 1994, p. 97) is the motto of a largely 'frictionless' transition after school and university into the

1 This article is based on the recently published country study in the 'Internationales Handbuch der Berufsbildung. Japan' (Eswein, Alexander & Pilz 2023) and a contribution by Pilz, Sakano and Alexander (2023).

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Japanese vocational training system (Pilz & Alexander, 2007, pp. 28–29). Comparative vocational education and training research still refers to the so-called 'market model'[2], which emphasises company-specific vocational education and training in Japan; the importance of state-regulated 'vocational education and training' in the country is very low (Crouch, Finegold and Sako, 1999, pp. 24–25, 201–205; Di, 2007, p. 18; Euler, 2013, p. 66). Educationally, meritocratic contexts of the Japanese 'society of education pathways' (*gakureki shakai*) have always contributed to degrading public 'vocational education' to a marginal phenomenon (Busemeyer, 2013, p.7; Coulmas, 2003, p. 178; Kaneko, 2019, p. 31). This divergence – for example, in comparison with Germany – leads to a need for clarification, which arises on the one hand from structural-functional differences and on the other hand already from linguistic imprecision (Alexander, 2004, pp. 343–353; Alexander, 2011, p. 157). Although many publications are available in German or English, current Japanese publications are rarely consulted here. This makes the transparency of an international dialogue more difficult (see, for example, Pilz 2011, p. 10). And if German or English translations of Japanese texts are available at all, it often turns out that the content of the terms has been translated carelessly, to say the least. The very term 'vocational education' is already misleading, because in Japan, according to Confucian tradition, there are no 'professions', no 'vocatio', therefore no 'job profiles' and least of all, a strictly state-

2 The "market model" is to be seen in contrast to the "state" or "school model" and the "dual or cooperative model" (also "state-controlled market model"; Georg, 1989), which is, however, not entirely consistent in itself (Deißinger & Frommberger, 2010, pp. 346–347; Lauterbach, 2003, pp. 17–18, 265–267). There are further and more meaningful models, for example by Crouch, Finegold and Sako (1999, pp. 24–25), in which Japan is the only country primarily assigned to the concept of "institutional companies", a model of comparative political economy with reference to vocational education and training (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012) or the "multi-perspective classification" focussing on vocational education and training processes in a multi-level approach (macro, meso and micro level) by Matthias Pilz (2017; see also Pilz, Sakano and Alexander, 2023, pp. 86–88). A distinction is also made between the 'business concept' (e.g., Japan) and the 'occupational concept' (e.g., Germany) (Pilz, 2011, p. 274–293).

regulated vocational education system (Busemeyer, 2013, p. 7; Georg, 1994, p. 177; Drinck, 1997, p. 205; Pilz & Alexander, 2016, p. 209).[3]

Despite superficially observable tendencies towards continuity, education policy in the Far Eastern island country is undergoing profound change. Processes of differentiation are not only evident in the in-company training of large, medium-sized and small companies, but also affect the state education system, which to a certain extent provides preparatory training: Demographic changes and the associated tendencies towards a shortage of labour on the employment market[4] as well as other, in some respects clearly noticeable, socio-economic developments over the last 30 years have also led to changes in the education sector to a large extent: in recent decades, there has been an adjustment of the previously strict separation between general education and in-company training with the result that an erosion of the general academic education system has taken place in favour of the inclusion of 'vocational' components. Here, buzzwords such as 'employability', 'vocationalism' or 'career education' (*kyaria-kyôiku*) are used (Ito, 2014, pp. 177–178, 181–3); they are being incorporated into (higher) education curricula in order to prepare less able young people in particular for working life in a more targeted manner; in Japan, too, there are increasing signs of a 'fitting-into-the-company' issue. Above all, the clientele of universities now also includes young people who, as a result of the 'lost decade',

3 If a translation is necessary, 'vocation' should be understood in the sense of a value-neutral American 'profession' or 'occupation'; other common English-language translations can also be 'business education', 'workplace learning' or 'human resource development/management' (Negrini, 2016, p. 9). Against the background of a Shinto-Buddhist and Confucianist social order, the term 'vocatio', a 'vocation', of which the roots are anchored in the Christian faith, cannot be localised (Blankertz, 1975, pp. 2–3). This makes it all the more confusing when English-language publications, e.g., in publications by the *kôseirôdôshô* (Japanese Ministry of Labour, Health, Labour and Welfare [MHLW]), always refer to 'vocational training', although one should rather assume technical and economic specialisations here. The Japanese term is '*shokugyô*', which can best be described etymologically as 'employment, job' (*shoku*) and 'work, deed' (*gyô*) to be learnt (Henshall, 1989, pp. 75, 224). Nevertheless, the loan word '*berufu*' (deriving from the German word 'Beruf', 'vocatio') is still used in Japan, but it refers more to 'temporary jobs on the everyman's market', especially for female workers (Demes, 1994, p. 258). Consequently, it is not possible to speak of a vocational training contract between a prospective company employee and his company. Rather, it refers to the establishment of a working relationship between a company (*kyujinsha*) and an applicant for a job (*kyushokusha*) (MHLW, 2017, p. 1). However, the term 'vocational training' is still used in this article for pragmatic reasons.

4 Due to the rapidly declining number of potential employees in the course of the demographic development towards an ageing population, Japan is dependent on utilising all available human resources. The population of 18-year-old adolescents alone has fallen by more than 50%, from around 2.49 million in 1966 to 1,120,000 in 2021 (MEXT, 2022, p. 151). Only in the years from 2017 to 2022, the number of mostly 18-year-old high school graduates fell further by around 10% (from 1,099,556 in 2017 to 1,000,600 in 2021 (MEXT, 2022, p. 336). In July 2023, the unemployment rate was a low 2.7 per cent (Statistical Bureau, 2023). Therefore, Japan is dependent on utilising all available human resources. Higher paid, older employees are now staying longer in companies and postponing retirement (Dressler, 2017, pp. 1–3; Kitagawa, Ohta & Teruyama, 2018, pp. 10–11; Suchan, 2018). After the company retirement age (usually 60 years) has been exceeded, a new employment contract is concluded. (Haghirian, 2016, p. 2; OECD, 2017, pp. 28–30; Statistical Bureau, 2023; Witzke, 2017, p. 358–364).

belong to the group of people[5] who previously earned their living as 'freeters' or 'part-timers'.[6] The increasing level of precarity and tendencies towards individualisation in the direction of less work and more leisure time (Yamashita, 2019, pp.12-14) among the young population forced the Japanese government to introduce reforms that led, among other things, to easier access to higher education (Goodman, Hatakenaka & Kim, 2009, p. 4; Ito, 2014, pp. 178–179; Ito, 2016, pp. 192–193).[7] This context gives rise to the following questions for this article:

1. How is the Japanese education system structured (Chapter 2)?
2. What does the 'transition system' from the Japanese education system to the labour market look like (Chapter 3)?
3. What is the recruitment practice in Japan like (Chapter 4)?
4. What trends of continuity and change can be seen in Japan's 'market model' (Chapter 5)?

2 The Japanese education system

2.1 Overview of the school system

The top PISA results in a country comparison already make a clear statement: The students of the Japanese education system are still among the best in the world. Even in the course of a reform period from the year 2000 onwards towards less teaching subjects and easier access conditions for tertiary educational institutions, which is also criticised as 'cuddle education' (*yutori kyôiku*), school performance has only slumped slightly (Ikegami, 2014, pp. 28–30; MEXT, 2013, p. 5; MEXT, 2017, p. 76). "Ganbatte!" "Do your best! Hang in there and don't give up!" is the catchphrase for a level of work discipline that is demanded very early in a Japanese person's schooling. Even today, the basic virtues developed in Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, such as discipline, striving for harmony within the group, loyalty and the learning ability of Japanese company employees,

5 The bursting of the real-estate bubble in the early 1990s and the subsequent 'lost decade' were the first harbingers of profound changes in the labour market and in many other areas of Japanese society (Coulmas, 2007, Chapter XII; Eli, 2004, p. 19; OECD, 2017, p. 28). Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has not shown any significant impact on the labour market (Hori, 2020, p. 52–54).

6 'Freeter' is a term that was created in 1987 by Hiroshi Michishita from the combination of the terms 'freelance' and the German 'Arbeiter' ('worker'). 'Freeter' therefore includes all young people who are unqualified, refuse to be 'company men' and work part-time (Fujita, 2011, p. 31; Hommerich, 2009, pp. 65–66; Honda, 2005, pp. 5–7). The MHLW also uses the terms 'pato' and 'arubaito' (Kosugi, 2005, pp. 2–3; MHLW, 2016, p. 152). The currently improved economic situation in Japan has reduced the proportion of freeters from the peak in 2003 (more than 2 million) to 1.37 million in 2021, i.e., by around 23% in the last decade, which the Japanese Labour Office attributes not least to its own work-promoting measures (Hori, 2023, p. 52; MHLW, 2015, p. 294; MHLW, 2016, p. 152; Pilz, Schmidt-Altmann & Eswein, 2013, pp. 73–74).

7 For example, state subsidies guarantee the survival of universities, which are paid out according to the criterion of a willingness to reform (Ito, 2014, pp. 178–179; Ito, 2016, pp. 192–193; MEXT, 2016, pp. 12–13).

the 'salarymen', are cited as the main reasons for economic success. Virtues that – to put it pointedly – have their roots in the kindergarten (*yôchien*) and are continued in school (*gakkô*).[8] Education in the virtues required by the company in the sense of a 'company man' (Eswein, 1997, pp. 228–229) is therefore ultimately provided by the state education system. This means that general education schools still lay the foundation for later socialisation in the company, as school and university graduates are not only hired in the first place because of these virtues: in companies, training is based on the same principles and methods as in school (Alexander, 1994, p. 60; Drinck, 1997, pp. 213–214; Hendry, 2009, pp. 82–84; MEXT, 2013, p. 2).

The Japanese education system was created under the aegis of the American occupation. On 31 March 1947, the 'Basic Education Law' (*kyôiku kihon-hô*) was adopted and the so-called 6-3-3-4 structure[9] was implemented (Luhmer, 1972, pp. 95, 105, 278). On the basis of a non-compulsory three-year kindergarten period[10], compulsory schooling lasts nine years. In greater detail, the most important school types are as follows:

2.1.1 Integrated Centres for Early Childhood Education and Care

These municipal facilities include both preschools and day nurseries *(yohorenkeigata-nintei-kodomo-en)* and are attended by a total of 57.7 % of all children in 2021 (MEXT, 2022, p. 336). There are also a number of private preschools. Children already wear uniforms here (Japanwelt, 2023).

2.1.2 Elementary schools, lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools

In 2021, 99.96 % of 6-year-old children attended compulsory elementary (primary) school (*shôgakkô*)[11] for 6 years and compulsory secondary school (*chugakkô*) for 3 years (MEXT, 2022, p. 336). Despite only nine years of compulsory schooling (*gimukyôiku-gakkô*) most pupils take the entrance exam for the next type of school; since the early 1990s, more than 95 % of all 15-year-olds have attended the senior high school (*kôtô gakkô)*. Currently, the rate of registered secondary school pupils is as high as 98.8 % (MEXT, 2022, p. 336).[12]

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8 In this respect and expressed pointedly, future top managers are already moulded in preschool (Alexander, 2007, p. 346; Fujimura, 2004).

9 The MEXT (2009, p. 53) translates primary school as 'elementary schools' (6 years), middle school as 'lower secondary schools' (junior high school) (3 years) and high school as 'higher secondary schools' (senior high school) (3 years). This is followed by higher education, which is predominantly a four-year programme.

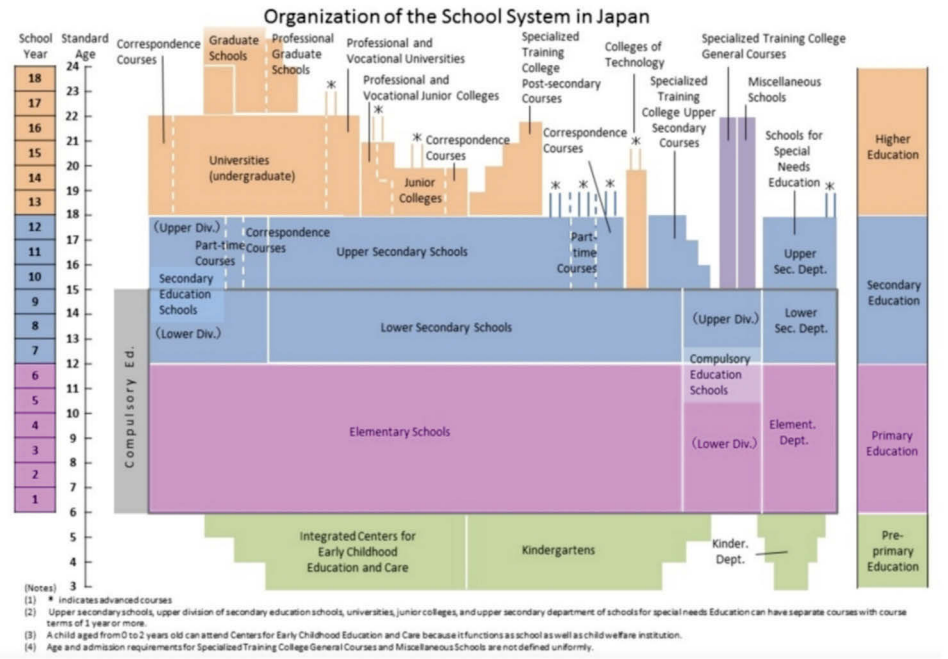
10 There are a number of pre-preschools (nurseries) where children are trained to be admitted to those prestigious preschools that have good prospects of progressing to prestigious schools and thus good prospects of later careers (Clark, 2005, p. 4).

11 The schools for special needs education/*tokubetsu shien gakkô*) (MEXT, 2023) are not the subject of this report.

12 The number of pupils has also fallen sharply as a result of demographic developments: in 1990, the number of secondary school pupils was still over 5.6 million, while the latest statistics for 2021 from MEXT show only around 3.2 million pupils (MEXT, 2022, p. 334). As a result, the number of schools across the country has also decreased: from just under 27,000 primary schools in 1960, around 19,000 still exist in 2021, of which just over 1% are private. The number of secondary schools has fallen from around 14,000 (1950) to 10,012 (2021), with private institutions currently accounting for around 8%. The number of secondary schools fell from a high of 5,500 (1990) to

Almost all young people who attend a secondary school leave with a secondary school diploma, the *kôtôgakkô sotsugyô shômeishô* (ISCED level 3); there are virtually no dropouts or early school leavers (OECD, 2017, p. 119).[13]

Figure 1: The education system in Japan



Source: MEXT ,2023;[14] OECD, 2015[15]

4,824 (2021); of these, more than a quarter are already private (1,321), while the rest (3,589 institutions) are state-run. (MEXT, 2017, p. 452; MEXT, 2022, p. 334).

13 Almost 1.5% of all pupils at secondary schools leave school without a qualification; the drop-out rate is 4.5% across all school types (OECD, 2017, pp. 118–119).

14 The Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) is not only responsible for the structures of the Japanese education system, but also for determining curricular content and the number of lessons to be taught (UNESCO, 2011, p. 11).

15 In this context, the references to the ISCED criteria (International Standard Classification of Education) of UNESCO for the comparison of international education systems from 2011 (Bohlinger, 2012, p. 16; OECD, 2017) are interesting; it led to an expansion of the tertiary sector internationally, which at the same time led to an appreciation, in particular, of the areas below the Bachelor's level and fundamentally resulted in increasing rates of academization (Schwarzenbacher, 2015, pp.1-2). In addition, they offer an essential opportunity to compare school forms and degrees internationally. However, they are only implicitly included in the statistical reports of the Japanese Ministry of Education, the '*monbukagakushô*' or '*monbushô*', (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology/MEXT). Besides, they are rarely mentioned explicitly in Japanese publications, and are not even mentioned in the current MEXT White Paper (2022).

Secondary school profiles can basically be divided into three categories: general, specialised and integrated. While the general profiles focus on typical general education content and topics, the specialised focus areas are characterised by 'vocational' and technical topics for those young people who are not counted among the elite in terms of performance and who wish to apply for specific operational and technical positions in the various 'occupational fields'. They often do not have good prospects of long-term employment in a high-ranking company.[16] In addition to the compulsory general education, integrated forms of schooling provide rudimentary specialised vocational and technical training. The fact that six-year 'comprehensive secondary schools' (*chûkô kyôiku gakkô or chûkô ikkankô*), consisting of middle and high schools, have been in existence since April 1999 is only mentioned in passing (Ikegami, 2014, pp. 310–312; MEXT, 2023; OECD, 2017, p. 112; UNESCO, 2011, p. 9).

Japan's general education system is often equated with the Shinkansen, the Japanese express train, as the post-war expansion has led to unprecedented competition for admission, the so-called 'exam hell' (*shiken jikoku*)[17,18] to the best secondary educational institutions. Only those who graduate from a high-ranking secondary school (*kôtôgakkô sotsugyô shômeishô*) and only those who pass the entrance exam to a high-ranking university have the prospect of a career in a high-ranking company or government agency. All other higher education institutions train graduates – analogous to the specialised forms of secondary school – who are predominantly distributed among less prestigious medium-sized or small companies. The competition to pass the examinations for the elite institutions was made more difficult by the expansion of the teaching subjects and an increase in the speed of learning (*shinkansen kyôiku*) (Haasch, 2000, p. 195) in the post-war period. This in turn led to the start-ups of numerous tutoring and cram schools (*juku/yobikô*),[19] which were and still are attended by the students who are most eager to learn.[20]

16 Various programmes are also offered here, including: agriculture, forestry and fisheries, industrial, business and housekeeping, health, science and mathematics (UNESCO, 2011, p. 9).

17 These are very tough entrance examinations for prestigious schools and universities, with high failure rates being the rule, so that the 'candidates' usually take several entrance examinations for alternative universities in case they fail at a school or university of their choice (Alexander, 2004, p. 345).

18 For admission to state universities, applicants must undergo two examination procedures: One is the standardised university entrance examination of the state and the other is the selection procedure of the individual universities. Private universities reserve the right to organise their own entrance examinations (Teichler, 2000, p. 334).

19 Passing the 'exam hell' before admission to a higher-ranking school or university is generally only possible by attending this '*juku*' (cram school) or '*yobikô*' (preparatory school) for the university entrance examinations for those persons who, by not passing the 'examination war', spend another year as so-called '*rônin*' (masterless samurai) at the '*yobikô*' and take a second attempt at the university entrance examinations (Teichler, 2000, pp. 334–335). The time required for their attendance after the normal school day (after 4:00 pm until sometimes 10:00 pm) in the evening is considerable. Pupils then often sleep in their regular lessons, as they rate private tuition as comparatively more important than the conventional, state-mandated lessons at schools (Alexander, 2004, p. 354).

20 For the explanation and meaning of *juku*, see Entrich (2016).

2.1.3 Institutions of Higher Education: Universities and formal state-tertiary 'vocational training'

59.6 % of all high-school graduates go on to study at a two-year junior college (5.5 %) (*tanki daigaku*)[21] or a university (*daigaku*) (49.3 %). Before the 'bubble' burst in the 1990s, the figure was 30.6 %, in 2000 it was already 45.1 % (MEXT, 2022 p. 336); a visible consequence of the demographic development and the continuing expansion of education in favour of universities; they can increasingly be seen as the largest 'vocational preparation' institution in Japan (Drinck, 1997, p. 216). A large number of students reacted to the increasingly tense labour market by staying in the education system for longer, hoping that a higher level of education would improve their chances of working in an attractive company (BBIB-iMove, 2005, pp. 40–42).

16.3 % of all high school students are currently enrolled in a third – most likely 'vocational' – type of higher education institution, the five-year technical colleges (Colleges of Technology/*kôto senmon gakkô*).[22] 17.9 % of all secondary school students move directly into employment (MEXT, 2022, p. 326.), the rest remain on the labour market as unemployed, non-employed graduates, 'freeters', 'part-timers' or NEET (Igami, 2014, p. 57). The high academization rate[23] of 76.3 % in total (MEXT, 2022, p. 336) is therefore the reason why Japan is often referred to as an 'educational society' (*gakureki shakai*) (Coulmas, 2003, p. 178).

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21 In the early years of the 21st century, a good 90% of all students were still female, as this type of higher education institution was traditionally attended for female 'professions' such as nursery school teachers and teachers, 'professions' in nursing, home economics and other social fields (Clark, 2005, p. 13; Drinck, 1997, p. 217; Goodmann, Hatakenaka & Kim, 2009, p. 7). In this respect, targeted 'vocational training' is already taking place at these junior colleges, which is aimed at direct use in the working world with a 'quasi-bachelor's degree' (*jungakushi or tanki-daigakushi*) or the 'final certificate of junior college' (*tanki daigaku shuryô shoshô*) (ISCED level 5b) (MEXT, n.d., p. 5; OECD, 2015). Master's degrees and doctorates play a role both in medical and technical disciplines and as proof of teaching qualifications at upper secondary and higher education schools (UNESCO, 2011, pp. 21–23). After completing their bachelor's degree, most people finish their university studies; only in very few cases are companies interested in the master's degree (*shushi-go*/two-year duration) (ISCED level 7) or doctoral degree (*hakushi-go*/three years) (ISCED level 8) (MEXT, 2022, p. 336).

22 With around 77% (*daigaku*) and 94.5% (*tanki daigaku*) and almost 94% (*kôto senmongakkô*) (MEXT, 2022, pp. 334–335) of all registered students, the private sector in Japan plays a decisive role in the post-secondary and tertiary education landscape. In addition to private universities, there are state and local universities (for a distinction, see MEXT, 2017, pp. 452–454): due to a considerable decline in students due to demographic change, the number of state universities has fallen from 100 to 86, which is also due to a number of mergers (Clark, 2005, pp. 8–9; MEXT, 2022, p. 334). Nevertheless, enrolment figures are increasing year on year thanks to easier access conditions at state universities, and the number in the private sector has also risen from around 480,000 in 1990 to more than 2.9 million (2021) (MEXT, 2022, p. 334; Clark, 2005, pp. 8–9).

23 'Academization' is – analogous to international developments – also a catchword in the Japanese higher education landscape; according to the ISCED classification of 2011 (UNESCO, 2011), in addition to universities (ISCED levels 6–8), both the two-year junior colleges (ISCED level 5a) and the five-year technical universities of applied sciences (ISCED level 5b) are classified as tertiary education (MEXT, 2013, p. 7; OECD, 2017, p. 112–113).

2.1.4 Colleges of technology, specialised training colleges and various 'vocational' schools

Colleges of technology/*kôtô senmon gakkô* are considered elite schools for targeted technical 'vocational' training in Japan (BIBB-iMOVE, 2005, p. 15; Drinck, 1997, p. 216).[24] They have a dual character, as they are assigned to upper secondary schools (3 years) on the one hand and to the university sector (2 years) on the other. Their importance has remained more or less constant at around 15 % to 17 % (MEXT, 2022, p. 336) and here around 80 % of participants are male. This is hardly surprising, as the programmes are usually five-year engineering courses. Young people therefore do not enter a general secondary school, but start their studies directly at these five-year technical colleges. These *kôtô senmon gakkô* differ most from other general education universities in the MEXT's educational map in that, like the junior colleges, they also have a more 'vocational' focus, although academic skills are also promoted (MEXT, 2016, p. 29). After three years, students acquire the vocational secondary school diploma, the *kôtôgakko sotsgyô shoshô* (ISCED level 3), and – like all other high school graduates – they can apply to universities for the entrance exams and thus for 'advanced engineering courses' *(kôtô senmon gakkô senkôka)*. However, as 'specialists' intended for an entrepreneurial career, the students of the special secondary schools have considerable disadvantages in the struggle to succeed in the above-mentioned 'exam hell' compared to the academically prepared secondary school graduates of the general secondary schools, as the examination tasks of the entrance exams are based on the content of the general education courses (Clark, 2005, p. 8; Goodman, Hatakenaka & Kim 2009, p. 11).

Following the three-year vocational secondary school, graduates receive a recognised higher education qualification below bachelor's level, the *jungakushi* ('quasi-bachelor', 'associate's degree') (ISCED level 5b), after two further years at the technical colleges (MEXT oJ, p. 5). These two years thus move into tertiary higher education or the academic sector (Goodman/Hatakenaka/Kim 2009, p. 9).[25]

A number of specialised training colleges (*senshu gakkô*) complete the picture of the education system under the Japanese Ministry of Education. They are very similar to technical universities of applied sciences, also have a clear 'vocational' orientation, and round off the spectrum of the education system orchestrated by the Japanese Ministry of Education (BIBB-iMOVE, 2005, p. 15).[26]

In addition to various vocational and technical secondary school courses as well as academically oriented 'vocational training' under the state sovereignty of the Ministry of Education (MEXT), there are a number of other 'vocational schools': 'vocational training schools', 'vocational training junior colleges' or 'technical development (training)

24 Their specialisms include mechanical engineering, information technology, electronics, chemistry, construction and commercial shipping (Abe, 1991, p. 13; Drinck, 1997, p. 216).

25 Students who already have a high-school diploma can immediately enrol in the fourth year of a College of Technology. Graduates of the five-year programme have the opportunity to apply for the third year of a university bachelor's degree. (Clark, 2005, p. 14; Hayakawa, 1993, p. 49; OECD 2015, pp. 76–78).

26 A more detailed description can be found in chapters 3.1 and 3.2 of the country study on Japan published in 2023 in the 'Internationales Handbuch der Berufsbildung. Japan' (Eswein, Alexander & Pilz, 2023).

centres'. They are operated either by the Japanese Ministry of Labour, the *kôseirôdôshô*, (MHLW) or otherwise by entrepreneurial or business-related, i.e., private institutes. Particularly with regard to the company-related institutes, it can be stated that well-functioning networks ensure the maintenance of these special 'vocational training' institutes (Hayakawa, 1993, pp. 51–52). There is an almost immeasurable amount of certificates that attest to completed measures or special qualifications and that can be used for job applications; in many cases, this increases the chances of being hired by companies (JILPT, 2011, pp. 10–11; Nishimura, 2011). The Japanese dual 'job card system' (*'jobu kâdo seido'*) is worth mentioning: Theoretical and practical elements are completed on a 'dual' basis, and there is no denying that the German dual system of vocational education and training is a role model. Compared to the German dual system of vocational training, however, this measure can be seen more as a pre-vocational training programme (Ichimi, 2012, p. 10; MHLW, 2015, pp. 295–296; Lippegaus-Grünau, 2013, p. 6).

2.2 Development trends in the tertiary education system

For the employment elite, it has always been difficult to get into Japanese universities (*daigaku*), but it has been easy to leave with a degree' (Ogawa, 1999, p. 22). Once the hurdle of the entrance exams has been overcome, the subsequent university period is easy; for once, the Japanese have the opportunity to relax from the stressful school days and take a holiday – at the expense of discipline. Almost all enrolled students complete their studies within the four-year 'standard study period' and are then available to the labour market at the age of 22 or 23 (Pilz & Alexander, 2007, p. 28). The degree (bachelor's degree/*gakushi shôgô*) (ISCED level 6) at the end of the study period was traditionally awarded almost free of charge.

Meanwhile, the increase in the rate of academization due to demographic and socio-political developments has led to a drastic drop in the difficulty level of some entrance exams. This has led to a battle for student numbers: in the past there used to be seven subjects up for examination, today there are often only two subjects, sometimes even just one subject, up for consideration. This means that lower-performing and less disciplined secondary school leavers also have a good chance of gaining a university degree, because nowadays it is often easy to get into university and just as easy to graduate. Anyway, especially the high-ranking universities, which continue to be committed to the future employment elite, are still exempt from this (Sakano, 2011, p. 135; Uenishi, 2011, pp. 86–87, 97–98).

It was and still is typical for students to enrol in various easy-to-manage courses in the first three years, while the fourth year is all about finding a job. This is the least of the companies' concerns; they look at which university the jobseekers come from, not at their academic achievements, as the school system has already provided all the necessary qualifications (Metzler, 2000, pp. 336–343; MEXT, 2013, p. 6; Ogawa, 1999, p. 22). In the case of graduates from lower-ranking universities, however, it is clear that a university degree can no longer be seen as a guarantee of good, lifelong or regular employment opportunities: while 81 % of all graduates found regular employment in 1990, this figure had fallen to 74.5 % by 2016 – despite the excellent labour market situation; this was a

noticeable drop, which was also related to the lower academic performance of graduating students (Uenishi, 2011, p. 87, 94; MEXT, 2022, p. 338).

Since the government-initiated amendment to the Japanese Education Act in May 2017, a significant differentiation can be observed in Japan's tertiary education structures: Universities and junior colleges are now to provide higher education geared towards vocational skills under the designations 'professional and vocational junior colleges' and 'professional and vocational universities'. Class sizes should not exceed 40 participants, and 40 % of lecturers must have relevant practical experience (Kaneko, 2019, pp. 33–34) This model is accompanied by the view that the relationships between universities and the employment system are changing significantly. The reform project has been underway since April 2019, and it remains to be seen how it will prove its worth (Kaneko, 2019, pp. 41–42; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2015).

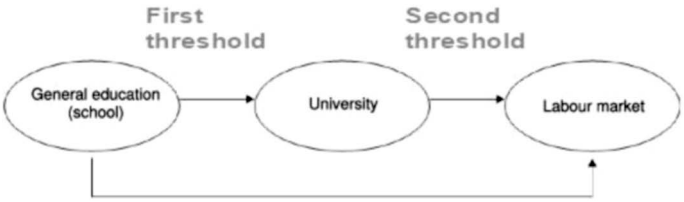
The increasing attractiveness of a university degree is also linked to a kind of countermovement in the two- to three-year short universities (*tanki daigaku*); here, the number of enrolled students is declining: in 1990, there were still around 480,000 or just under 16 %, by 2022, the number had fallen to almost 95,000 or 5.5 % (MEXT, 2022 p. 334); an indication of the declining importance of junior colleges. This was not entirely without consequences, as some of the junior colleges have transformed themselves into 4-year university institutions due to the declining development, as competition to the already existing universities (Goodman, Hatakenaka & Kim, 2009, p. 7).

Compared to universities and junior colleges, technical colleges (*kôtô senmon gakkô*) have the advantage that they can operate comparatively free of state regulations. As a result, they are more flexible and better prepared for future technical trends and requirements from business practice, and they integrate their graduates into the labour market more quickly: 56 % (with a declining trend) go directly into practice (MEXT, 2022, p. 338).

3 The transition from the education system to the labour market

In the past, the lack of 'vocations' led to a rather subordinate role of independent, state-regulated vocational training, which can be well illustrated by the 'royal road' of the so-called 'threshold concept' for Japan, according to which the transition from the school or university system to the employment system was usually direct. As a result, state-regulated vocational training became – as mentioned above – rather marginal (Alexander & Pilz, 2004, p. 758; Pilz & Alexander, 2011, p. 270).

Figure 2: Threshold concept for Japan



Source: Pilz & Alexander, 2011, p. 270; Pilz & Alexander, 2020, p. 296; Pilz, Sakano & Alexander, 2023, p. 90

On the one hand – in line with the threshold concept – traditional 'preservation structures' still exist, which enable performance-orientated young people to make a smooth transition from high-ranking universities into stable, regular employment relationships with high-ranking companies as 'white-collar generalists' and thereby obtain a high-status position (Pilz & Alexander, 2011). On the other hand, the focus of state education policy has increasingly turned to the academization of young people who are less performance-oriented and threatened by precarious employment, as well as attempting to enhance the already poor image of 'vocational training' (Goodmann, Hatakenaka & Kim, 2009, p. 8). This does not appear to be easy, as its negative image is deeply rooted in the cultural realities of the Far Eastern island country (BBIB-iMOVE, 2014, p. 22; Eswein, 2016, p. 229). The aim of these efforts by the Ministries of Education and Labour is to create better employment prospects in companies for the less able young people, the 'non-elite university students' (Igami, 2014; MHLW, 2015, pp. 291–293). Together with demographic and economic changes, the drive towards academization is leading to a change in the higher education[27] landscape, resulting in a percentage increase in student numbers, particularly at universities. The threshold concept is therefore still evident. The academization efforts are supported by horizontal and vertical permeability between the different types of higher education institutions. For example, it is becoming quite interesting for university students to attend technical courses at the technical colleges or the various 'vocational' educational institutions under the aegis of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour. Such certified additional qualifications are sought in order to obtain further application advantages in the competition for regular employment with companies (JILPT, 2011, p. 11). The lower the rank of a university, the easier the entrance exams are, the higher the chances of entry will be; private universities in particular will therefore be the most likely candidates for de facto horizontal and vertical permeability (Cedefop, 2009, p. 2; Goodmann, Hatakenaka & Kim, 2009,

27 The efforts towards academization are accompanied by efforts to counter the lower educational level of many young people through special 'vocational' support courses and 'career guidance/support centres' at higher education institutions and to prepare them for working life (Ito, 2014, pp. 181–183).; MEXT, 2013, p. 8; Terada, 2011, p. 107; Uenishi, 2011, pp. 96–98). Even general education schools have been increasingly offering career counselling for several years (Fujita, 2016; Komikawa, 2021, pp. 40–42).

p. 11; Zergani, 2015). Here, in turn, there are development trends that undermine the threshold concept.

In this context, close networking between the expectations of companies seeking employment and the associated willingness of universities to cooperate is of great importance, as it leads to integration efforts on both sides: The increase in the number of students studying for higher education qualifications is counteracted by the fact that degrees from lower-ranking universities in particular no longer necessarily lead to advantages when looking for work (Uenishi, 2011, p. 94; Uenishi, 2013, pp. 80–82). In addition, many underachieving young people are reluctant to accept company expectations in the direction of 'potential for personal growth' (Kaneko, 2014, p. 12). Increasingly easier access to university education means that companies hiring non-elite university students no longer have an exam-tested elite to choose from. It has therefore become more difficult to assess applicants in terms of their trainability and academic standards (Igami, 2014, p. 58). For the target group of 'non-elite university students', this is to be compensated for by the MEXT's goal of liberalising universities and including integrated career support in their curricula (Igami, 2014, p. 54; Ito, 2014, p. 183). This includes raising work morale, promoting 'professional' independence and mobility and developing employability skills (Ito, 2014, pp. 180–182; Kaneko, 2014, p. 19; Uenishi, 2011, pp. 96–97).

In addition, the introduction of technically oriented specialisations (*senmonshoku dagakuin*) in the research-oriented universities has led to a kind of poaching of successful technical degree programmes or 'vocational' measures in the fields of health and social services (nursing, psychotherapy) by the universities (MEXT, 2013, p. 5). These technical oriented disciplines to support social expectations and entrepreneurial educational aspirations entail a 're-learning' of essential virtues and a subsequent academization that should originally have been provided by the school education system. Curricular components of university education now include reading and writing skills, even the 1006 kanji characters, which are actually part of primary school education (Igami, 2014, p. 59). Furthermore, learning and communication skills, problem-solving strategies, teamwork and leadership, as well as ethical and social characteristics have been incorporated into the university curricula. These measures are rounded off by internships, in which students learn to adapt to the practical world of work in companies on the one hand, and, on the other hand, companies can gain a more intensive impression of potential applicants (Ito, 2014, pp. 181–182; Kaneko, 2014, p. 19; MEXT, 2013, p. 8).

4 The company's recruitment and training practice

The 1st of April each year not only signals cherry blossom season, but also the recruitment ceremonies for 'freshmen', the '*shin nyû shain*', are held across the country to mark the transition into the world of work for new employees. In a way, there is still a collective attitude here, visible in the many young people newly dressed in business outfits who, as one of their first 'training' tasks, keep seats free on blue plastic mats under blossoming

cherry trees for their work colleagues to celebrate the '*hanami*', the cherry blossom festival. (Alexander, 2013, p. 61; MHLW, 2017, p. 1).[28]

Despite all the appreciation for Japan's education system, it should be noted once again that 'vocational' or 'skilled labour training' must be considered a central weakness of the Japanese vocational training model from the outset; in the last decades of the 20th century, it was only further developed by the state in a very uncoordinated manner (Dore & Sako, 1998, p. 167; Goodman, Hatakenaka & Kim, 2009, p. 8). At the centre of all educational aspirations and status assignments is traditionally and still for the Japanese youth cohorts the culturally significant ideal of employment for life (*shûshin koyôsei*) as regular workers in a large company (*ichi-ryû gaisha*) or public institution that is as high-ranking and prestigious as possible; this is where independent preparation for the internal working world ultimately takes place as 'vocational training without a profession' (Eswein, 2016, pp. 230–231; Imai, 1994, p. 94; Nakane, 1991, p. 95). The unrestricted immersion in the company and the unconditional identification and loyalty to 'my company' corresponds to the traditional Japanese group culture, which was founded in prehistoric farming structures (Nakane, 1991, p. 95); the poaching of qualified employees experienced in many other countries (Pilz, 2009) can therefore be observed to a lesser extent (Pilz & Alexander, 2016, p. 215).

Company newcomers from a high-ranking 'brand university' are hired from the outset as permanent or core staff and therefore as versatile 'generalists'[29] (*ippan shoku*). In addition, there are broad-based specialists (*habahiroi senmongata*), e.g., engineers, who also find employment as regular workers, as 'lifelong' employees (Alexander, 2011, p. 162).[30] If, however, company newcomers (*shin nyû shain*) come from less important secondary schools, this is more of a hindrance to a career in the company; as 'blue-collar workers', as 'specialists'[31] (*senmon shoku*), they then mostly take the path to unskilled, temporary

28 Employment contracts are not on the agenda (Georg & Demes, 2000, p. 307).

29 In addition to the generalists, there are those who want to make a career and embark on the *sogoshoku*, the 'managerial career track' (Sano, 2016, p. 47).

30 Even though the recruitment of regular employees has increased somewhat in recent years, it should not be underestimated that companies are increasingly switching to hiring specialists as regular employees due to economic requirements (Igami, 2014, p. 65). Companies are increasingly taking advantage of this situation by outsourcing off-the-job training elements (OFF-JT) in order to influence not only universities, but above all other tertiary educational institutions, in their favour. (Igami, 2014, pp. 66–67; Ito, 2014, pp. 177–179)

31 Such 'narrower' specialists, who are regarded as '*semai senmongata*' for the technical field, often come from vocational high schools or Japanese technical schools, the *senmon gakkô*, if they are not university-educated engineers (Georg & Demes, 2000, p. 287).

employment (non-regular employment)[32] (Pilz & Alexander, 2016, p. 210; Kosugi, 1994, pp. 366–367; Nakazawa, 2014, p. 17; Georg & Demes, 1995, pp. 100–102).

Although the focus is on in-company qualification and socialisation and although Japanese companies are also increasingly addressing insidious suitability issues (Hori, 2019, pp. 8–13), it should not be ignored that – to put it bluntly – Japanese schools and universities are still regarded by companies as training grounds and preparation systems for a career in the workplace (threshold concept). Traditional good relationships, 'old boys' networks', between companies and schools, colleges and universities ('pipeline system') (Jambor, 2017, p. 149) are shifting recruitment processes to the state education system.

Japanese companies continue to favour the 'market model' with their very company-specific 'on-the-job training' (OJT), although 'off-the-job training' (Off-JT) elements are also found, for example, when subject-specific courses supplement the OJT offer (Ballon, 2005, p. 67). The company-specific OJT and Off-JT are complemented by the requirement for self-learning (Terasawa, 2011, p. 25).[33]

This 'market model' is still ultimately supported by the legal situation: company training is regulated by the Japanese 'Vocational Training Act' of 1969 *(shokugyô nôryoku kaihatsu sokushinhô*[34]). Strong tendencies towards preserving the pure market model are evident here, especially as there are no inter-company training regulations for enterprises; they decide entirely on their own in-house training (Art. 9ff.).

Even today, no special 'professional' training is generally expected. The desired skills can still be imparted predominantly through 'on-the-job training' (OJT) and long-term job rotation in addition to alternating 'theoretical training modules', the 'off-the-job

32 'Regular employees' (*seiki koyô*) are those employees who are directly recruited by their companies, who have permanent employment contracts and are at the complete discretion of their company management with regard to their working hours, work assignments – e.g., abroad and other matters. In return, they receive comparatively high salaries, lifelong job security and good prospects for an entrepreneurial career. By contrast, so-called 'non-regular' employment relationships (*hi-seiki koyô*) are less attractive; remuneration is lower, contracts can be terminated and their development opportunities are low. Finally, there is the category of 'restricted employment': this intermediate form refers to specialists who enter into permanent employment, but are limited in terms of their remuneration and career opportunities. However, they are not as freely available to companies compared to the employees of 'regular employees' (Shimanuki, 2016, pp. 1–2; Toda, 2016, pp. 70–72). The distribution between 'regular staff' and 'non-regular staff' was 63.1% to 36.9% in 2022, with the gender-specific distribution changing again to the disadvantage of female employees: 53.4% compared to 77.8% male regular employees (Statistics Bureau, Japan 2023, p. 131f.). Kitagawa, Ohta and Teruyama (2018) define the relationship between 'regular' and 'irregular workers' as a "dual structure of the labour market" (p. 10). It should not go unmentioned that women are increasingly involved due to the current labour supply surplus. They are increasingly receiving 'renewable contracts' as permanent 'non-regular workers' (Kanai, 2013, p. 88–110).

33 These include so-called 'correspondence', language, IT courses, etc. (Esser, 1994, pp. 181–182). Additional information can also be found on the Japanese book market: the self-learning literature is diverse, but basically always contains matters that are typical of Japan, such as bowing, serving tea, polite language and forms, and much more. (Kabushiki Kaisha Omu, 1994; Nikkei Business, 2014; Ogata, 2013). There are even manuals written only for women (e.g., Matsumoto, 2013).

34 The English translation is: 'Human Resources Development Promotion Act', published by the Japanese Labour Office (MHLW, 2006; Nishiyama, 2006, p. 208).

training' (Off-JT), via the company (Alexander, 2011, pp. 164–166; Pilz & Alexander, 2016, pp. 215–217).[35] The slogan "Send them to us snow white" mentioned at the beginning symptomatically means nothing more for the recruitment policy of large Japanese companies than that the trainees are brought up to be incorporated into their company (Imai, 1994, p. 97, Nagano, 2014, pp. 31–32). It is only in manual jobs, which are predominantly completed by graduates of lower-level schools, that the provision of special qualifications is advantageous (Alexander, 2011, pp. 160–161; Fürstenberg, 1994, p. 116; Kosugi, 1994, pp. 366–367). From this perspective, preschools and general education schools are already preparing students for the world of work; for an employable elite, it is not about specialised entrepreneurial skills, but about general virtues (Pilz & Alexander; 2016, p. 216).[36]

5 Outlook

Observing the Japanese education system, a dichotomy is clearly evident: on the one hand, continuity tendencies indicate that Japan will stick to its '6-3-3-4-shinkansen system'. On the other hand, the 'vocational' education landscape in particular is changing rapidly (Chapter 2). Despite the prevailing market model in Japan with its implications for in-company 'vocational training', it has been shown that not only does 'vocational' pre-training regulated by the Ministry of Education (MEXT) exist, but 'vocational' institutions supervised by the Ministry of Labour (MHLW) also play an important role in the Japanese educational landscape. It has also been shown that integrative endeavours have led to particular differentiation and permeability in the higher education system, especially for 'non-elite' students. This softens the ideal route via the still favoured 'threshold concept'; a further link between general education schools and the labour market are the transition opportunities in the form of various vocational institutions (Chapter 3). Toyota's recent decision to no longer stick to 1 April as the hiring date, but to flexibly set different hiring dates, especially for 'career starters' and experienced 'mid-careers' (Yahoo, 2019, pp. 1–2; Hennings, 2021, pp. 49–51), shows that this is leading to changes in hiring practices. Nonetheless, continuity is also very pronounced here, with newcomers in particular still being integrated into the company systems on 1 April and OJT and OFF-JT still being the order of the day (Chapter 4).

35 Despite all the company-specific features of the OJT, there are roughly five phases: 1. Collective initiation rituals, 2. Brief introductory OJT, 3. Assignment to specialist departments with long-term OJT, 4. Assignment of responsibility for dispositive activities and 5. Assignment to career paths (Alexander, 2011, p. 163; these processes are described in more detail in Eswein, Alexander and Pilz 2023, chapter 4.4). There are two types of Off-JT: 1. Further training in the direction of career planning and 2. Special vocational-technical training (Fujimoto, 2018, p. 16). This is different in Germany, where essential aspects of vocational training are legally fixed nationwide by the 'Vocational Training Act' (Berufsbildungsgesetz) of 1969 (Arnold & Gonon 2006, p. 101).

36 For example, it is possible for a music graduate specialising in the violin to join the marketing department of a Japanese company; the company is traditionally only interested in 'biographical signals' (Alexander, 2011, p. 161).

In Japan, demographic and socio-cultural developments will, in all probability, also lead to a search for ways of absorbing employees affected by retirement through increasing substitution with female employees and longer-term employment of older people. It remains to be seen to what extent the door will also open for foreign workers. However, the trend towards academization involving 'vocational' training will continue. First and foremost, the urge for young people to obtain higher qualifications plays a role here. Yet it should not be underestimated that companies are taking into account the increasing pressure on the labour market and are increasingly offering regular jobs in good economic times – even in the COVID-19 period (Koji, 2020). Furthermore it is also recognisable that the recruitment of specialists will increase compared to the traditional recruitment of generalists, with the result that, in addition to practical company qualification, more and more 'outsourcing' is being carried out by corporate Off-JT (Alexander, 2011, p. 177): urgently needed skilled workers in companies are increasingly being trained by 'vocational' higher education institutions such as technical schools and technical colleges and even by universities (Igami, 2014, pp. 66–67; Ito, 2014, pp. 177–179). The pure market model is thus being increasingly 'undermined' in favour of at least formally state-regulated training of skilled workers at Japanese universities (Asao et al., 2014, pp. 4–5). Nonetheless, it is foreseeable that the quality of academic programmes will continue to decline as a result of fierce competition in the tertiary education sector due to academization, even if the top universities for an elite of future employees in high-ranking companies will presumably be able to set themselves apart in the future (Pilz & Alexander, 2016, p. 217).

Although the phenomenon of Japan represents a special case in terms of the changes in vocational and higher education, the question of the choice of perspective is often linked to the opportunities for comparison. If one compares education systems on the basis of simple typologies, such as the market model proposed here, with the dual or state model, then differences tend to come to the fore. The application of complex and multi-perspective classifications with several levels can, in turn, explore even more commonalities between different systems (Pilz, 2017; Alexander & Pilz, 2004), which opens up interesting research opportunities in the future, particularly for international comparative research into ('vocational') education systems.

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