

Education Policy in Japan: Building Bridges Towards 2030

Compared to other OECD countries, Japan's education system is one of the top performers among both youth and the adult population. But significant economic and socio-demographic challenges question the sustainability of this successful model. As a response, Japan has developed the **Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (2018-22)**, which focuses Japan's education policy on how to support individuals to prepare for 2030. In particular, curriculum design, teacher education, school organisation, financial support for non-mandatory stages of education, and lifelong learning are all part of the reform package Japan has put in place to embrace the future. The **OECD Education Policy Review of Japan** assesses the strengths and challenges of the current reform agenda in Japan and makes recommendations with regard to **the introduction of the new curriculum, the sustainability of holistic education, and the development of lifelong learning.**

Reforming the curriculum: An ambitious attempt to prepare young people for the future

International comparisons have long demonstrated that Japan is a high-performing country. In the 2015 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 15-year-old Japanese students ranked in the first decile in science, mathematics and reading. In the 2012 OECD Survey of Adult Skills, adults in Japan had the highest levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy among participating countries. Japan also had by far the smallest share of adults scoring at the lowest level of proficiency in both domains.



Despite the high performance of Japanese schools, reforms are needed to adapt to the future. Children entering education in 2018 will be young adults in 2030, facing challenges that are difficult to predict at present. Schools need to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, technologies that have not yet been invented and problems that have not yet been anticipated.

With a curriculum revised around every 10 years, Japan has established a regular cycle to continuously update it, building on evidence from teaching practices. In the new curricular reform, however, Japan has recognised the

need to update teaching and learning to foster competencies for the 21st century. In addition to knowledge, this includes **developing cross-curricular skills, such as problem-solving and creativity, and good learning habits.** To do so, the new curriculum (to be implemented from 2020-2022) focuses on using active learning strategies to develop the competencies of students around three pillars:

1. Motivation to learn and apply learning to life

2. Acquisition of knowledge and technical skills

3. Skills to think, make judgements and express oneself

For the intended curriculum to be implemented, Japan should not minimise the efforts required. Despite the high level of expertise and professionalism of teachers, delivering the new curriculum in the classroom will require shifts in pedagogy and instructional practice. **Teachers will need systematic training** to update their teaching methods and successfully assess the new competences developed. Furthermore, the university entrance exams, which currently prioritise knowledge and memorisation, continue to have a disproportionate influence on what actually happens in Japanese classrooms. If the design of the university exam is not aligned to the central learning goals of the new curriculum, it will hold the whole education system back, narrowing the scope of what is valued and what is taught, meaning that change inside the classroom and developments in students' competences are likely to be minimal.

Sustaining holistic education: A key objective for the education system

One crucial feature explaining the success of the education system in Japan is the **effective delivery of a well-rounded (holistic) education for children**: teachers are skilled and take good care of students overall; students are engaged and work collaboratively; parents prioritise learning and fund extra learning outside of school (*juku*); and communities support learning. This unique model is based on all parts of the system working together cohesively.

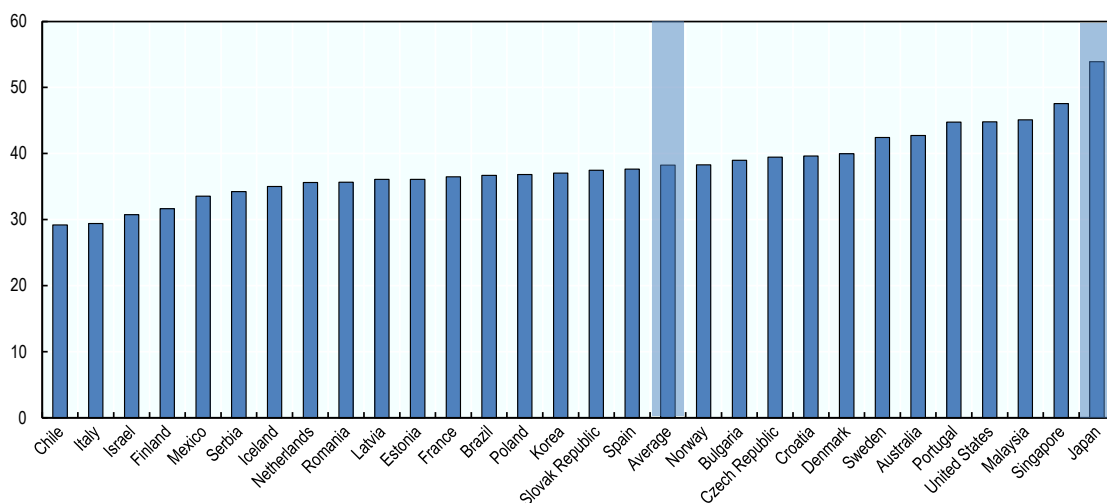
But the price for this system is **extraordinarily long working hours for teachers** and a high degree of responsibility, which limits teachers' ability to train and to adapt to the new curriculum. The current revision of the school organisation (*Team Gakkou*) aims to reduce the teachers' burden and to provide extra services to students at school. In the meantime, the government's ambition to strengthen partnerships between schools and communities is an attempt to sustain the holistic approach to education while socio-demographic and economic changes challenge the Japanese model of education.

However, it is important for Japan not to rush into a more Tayloristic work organisation within schools, as the broad set of responsibilities that Japanese teachers have towards their students is one of the keys to the success of its education system.

It is also important to note that the package of school-community partnership reforms is running alongside the significant curriculum reform. Given this and the challenge of long working hours for teachers in Japan, the design and implementation of reforms to develop and improve school-community partnerships must be targeted in a way that supports the broader curriculum reform.

Teachers' working hours

Average number of 60-minute hours lower secondary education teachers report having spent working during the most recent complete calendar week.



Notes: Working hours include teaching, planning lessons, marking, collaborating with other teachers, participating in staff meetings and other tasks related to the teacher's job at the school.

A "complete" calendar week is one that was not shortened by breaks, public holidays, sick leave, etc. Also includes tasks that took place during weekends, evenings or other off-classroom hours.

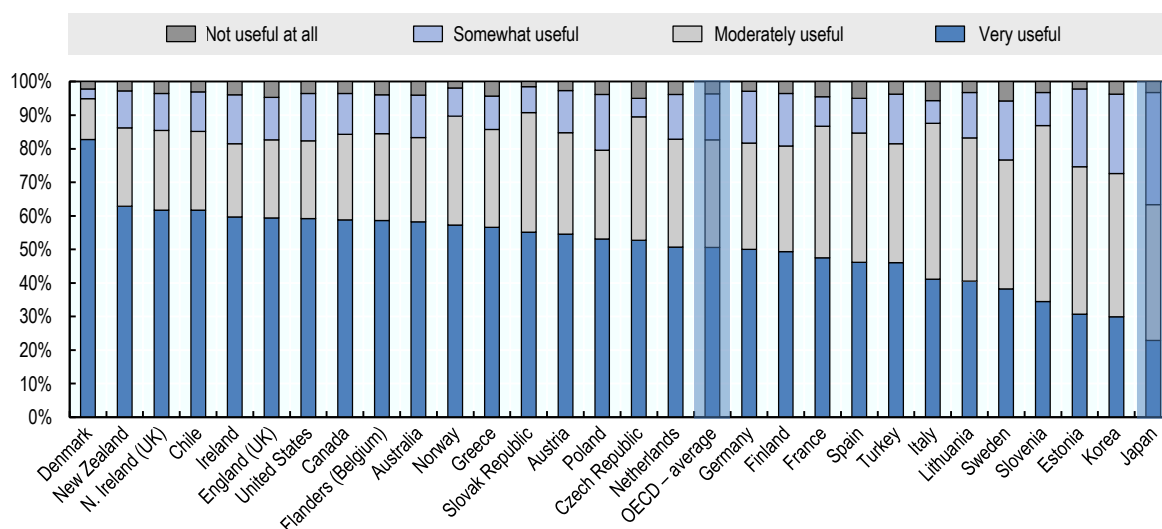
Source: OECD (2014), *TALIS 2013 Results: An International Perspective on Teaching and Learning*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264196261-en>, Table 6.12.

Lifting the contribution of education to the Japanese skills system: An urgent need for the Japanese society

Japan's education system is high-performing, but there is still room to further boost its contribution to overall skills development. While there is public funding for mandatory levels of education, **funding support is limited in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and tertiary education**, educational stages where Japanese households are among the highest contributors across OECD countries. This potentially limits opportunities for women and students of lower socio-economic status. The low uptake of adult training in Japan also implies that there is room for improving lifelong learning to help (potential) workers' upskilling or reskilling, and make the best use of the skills pool as the population has started to shrink.

Share of workers who found education and training useful for their job, 2012, 2015

25-65 year-olds participating in formal or non-formal education and training for job related reasons



Source: OECD calculations based on OECD (2017) Survey of Adults Skills database (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/.

Although no ECEC year is mandatory in Japan, enrolment rates in ECEC are high for children over four years old according to OECD standards, but significantly below those of leading countries for children below three years old. Gender imbalances also persist in the labour market, where the wage gap and the difference in the participation rates across gender are among the largest across OECD countries. Given the high educational achievement of women in Japan and the high population skill levels reported in the Survey of Adult Skills, women represent an important untapped supply of high-quality human capital in Japan.

The Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (2013-17) specified the **introduction of free-of-charge early-child education for all children**. Starting in 2014, this resulted in incremental financial efforts towards free access to early child education. The rationale is to provide incentives for women to access the labour market, and/or to have more children. In the meantime, the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) has started scaling-up its interest-free and income-contingent loans. A grant-type scholarship has also been introduced (April 2017) to lighten the financial burden on Japanese households.



The Survey of Adult Skills suggests that **participation in lifelong learning in Japan is low**, while readiness to learn among Japanese adults is close to the lowest of countries participating in the survey. Among the factors explaining such a low participation, Japanese adults exhibit tight time and financial constraints, lack of relevance of the training, and lack of interest or motivation. To boost participation in lifelong learning in Japan, there is a need to ensure that it matches labour market needs, supports reintegration of unemployed or non-active individuals and is available for workers who have limited time for study on top of their employment.

Recommendations:

Supporting Japan's education system transition into 2030

Prioritise implementation of the curriculum reform

- Develop a strategy that sets policy priorities around the curriculum and communicates its value to parents and communities to ensure adoption and support.
- Adapt existing assessments to reflect the new curriculum.
- Invest in teachers' training to reinforce their capacity to adapt their practices to the revised curriculum (particularly active learning).

Preserve the provision of well-rounded holistic education by enhancing school organisation and school-community partnerships

- Reform management practices to alleviate teachers' workload and invest in leadership.
- Focus partnerships with local communities on supporting the introduction of the new curriculum.
- Consider establishing specific structures and sparing resources to mitigate the risk of increased inequalities that could result from school-community partnerships.

Strengthen lifelong learning and financial arrangements for non-mandatory education to support equity

- Increase public funding to low-income households for ECEC and mainstream income-contingent loans for students accessing tertiary education.
- Design lifelong learning to meet the need for upskilling of both employers and the population.
- Ensure affordability, innovative delivery approaches and flexible scheduling for adult training.

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