

Letter from Japan



Words **Takahiro Okamoto**

Always known as a forward-thinking country, Japan is now questioning whether its approach to education and assessment is keeping pace with the rest of the world



Japan has long been seen as a world leader in primary and secondary education. Our schools' effectiveness and competitiveness are proved by international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. The strength of Japanese education lies especially in science and mathematics, and this has contributed greatly to Japan's reputation today as a high-tech country.

In Japan, compulsory education takes place from 6-15 years of age. Children spend their first six years in elementary school followed by three years in junior high school. This is followed by an optional three years in senior high school, dependent on success in the entrance exam. Senior high school is the majority option, however, with 96 per cent moving on to it at 15.

Surprisingly, and one of the first features of the Japanese education system that always attracts the attention of British people, is that we do not have a national exam system, such as GCSEs or A-levels, that lead to certification and accreditation.

Attainment level

Instead, entrance exams for individual institutions assess the attainment levels of pupils. Most people think this is the best way to gauge students' achievements. They are first tested aged 15, to gain acceptance at senior high school, and later to enter university. Each university sets its own entrance exam.

Within junior and senior high schools, there are mid-term exams and term-end exams. The academic year starts in April and ends in March, and is divided into three terms. The third term is rather short and so we offer five exams in each academic year with just one at the end of the last term. Students' achievement is evaluated by their classroom teachers based on these exams and their attitude towards learning. However, there is no detailed objective standard for this.

These arrangements do not mean our education system is fragmented, however. We have a competitive education system and a comprehensive national curriculum that aims to ensure that all students gain a certain level of academic ability.

This system is administered at local level by education boards, which are special councils with independence from local governors that decide on the best policy for schools in that area. The objectives of our schools are to foster people who can be members of a peaceful state and society and to encourage competent people to retain the economic dynamism of Japan.

Our education system is partly a legacy of the Second World War. After the war, Japan changed its approach to a US-style system under the US occupation, incorporating measures such as setting up local education boards to avoid political intervention in education. Our current system is based on this and the 6-3-3 approach (which refers to the number of years spent in an institution) mentioned earlier.

The other legacy of our approach to education is the work done in establishing a modern public education system in the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration (1866-1869, a period of social and political change to become the first constitutional monarchy in Asia when the Emperor was restored).

Before this, education was divided into two different education streams: schools for the samurai and ruling classes, and *Terakoya*, private schools for the rest of the population that originated in Buddhist temple schools. *Terakoya* greatly contributed to improving the literacy rates in Japan, but in 1872 a government order abolished these schools and made public schools compulsory.

Japan was the first country in Asia to introduce a modern public education system and it soon felt the benefits. A survey in 1902 found over 90 per cent of school-age children (both boys and girls) were

participating in school education. Thanks to the *Terakoya* and the modern education system, Japan has boasted high literacy and numeracy levels for a long time. These are widely seen as the major contributor to the modernisation of Japan after the Meiji Restoration and to the rapid post-war economic growth.

However, in recent years we have shared the anxiety of other developed countries, including the UK, as many Japanese people have become anxious about the feeling of our young people towards their country and their ability to integrate socially. There has been a national discussion about how to nurture in them a sense of belonging towards both our country and our society.

Test results

Like many countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, we are keenly awaiting the outcome of Pisa 2006. The results of these three-yearly international surveys of student achievement at 15 have sparked concern among Japanese parents and educators when Japan slipped in the rankings between the studies in 2000 and 2003.

As a result, most people think the education system should focus on improving students' attainment levels – but there was only a significant statistical difference in one of the measures, referred to as “literacies”. Our score in reading literacy was lower but there were no significant changes in mathematical and scientific literacy. Most people, including the media, tend to be too conscious about ranking but not about statistical meaning.

Takahiro Okamoto is education attache at the Japanese Embassy in London. His special interest is in looking at the role of schools in modern society. He was speaking to Stephanie Sparrow.