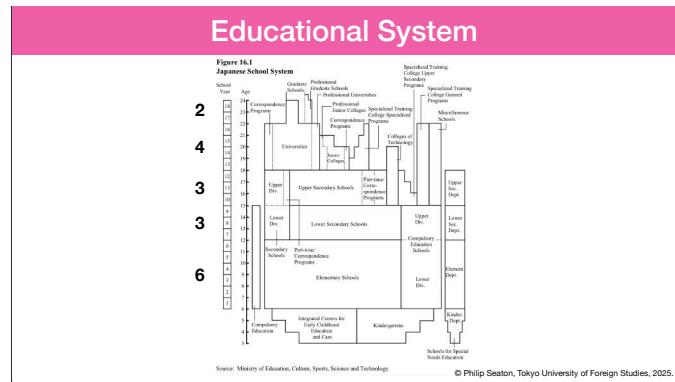




Today is a topic on which all of you have a huge amount of experience, although perhaps not a lot of expertise. We are talking about the Japanese education system. Much of the material about education is in the on-demand materials in the class website. I am only going to fill in a few of the gaps left by those materials.

1



As explained in Figure 16.1 of the Statistical Handbook of Japan, the Japanese education is what might be called the 6-3-3-4-2 system. The “four” refers to undergraduate study, where most of you are now. This needs little further explanation.

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## Private and Public Education

Table 16.1  
Educational Institutions in Japan (as of May 1, 2024)

Type of institution	Number of schools			Full-time teachers (1,000 persons)		Students (1,000 persons)	
	Total	National	Public	Private	Males	Females	
Kindergartens .....	8,530	47	2,534	5,949	83	381	377
Integrated centers for early childhood education and care ...	7,321	67	18,322	249	425	3,037	2,939
Elementary schools .....	18,622	68	9,023	781	247	1,606	1,535
Lower secondary schools .....	9,882	5	232	1	8	41	39
Compulsory education schools .....	238	15	3,438	1,321	223	1,482	1,425
Upper secondary schools .....	4,774	59	4	35	20	3	17
Secondary schools .....	59						
Schools for special needs education <sup>1)</sup> .....	1,191	45	1,130	16	89	104	52
Colleges of technology .....	288	51	3	4	43	13	
Junior colleges .....	297	7	15	282	6	11	67
Universities .....	813	86	103	624	193	1,630	1,320
Graduate schools .....	663	86	91	486	108	182	90
Specialized training colleges .....	2,997	8	178	2,811	39	266	344
Miscellaneous schools .....	998	-	5	993	9	57	50

1) Schools for mentally and/or physically challenged children, inclusive of kindergarten to upper secondary school levels.

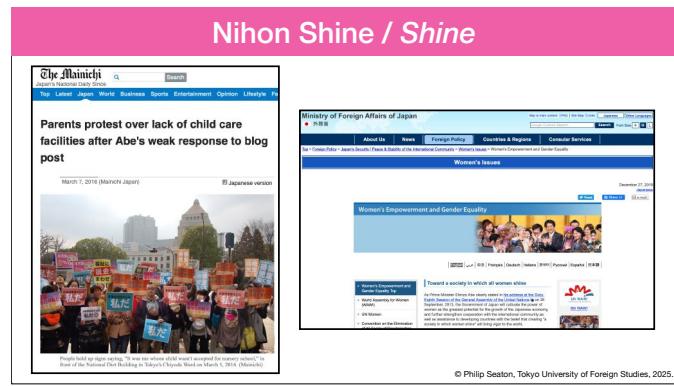
Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. © Philip Seston, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

However, I think Table 16.1 is worth discussing in a little more detail. This gives you an important indication of the priorities of the Japanese government regarding education. Educational institutions are divided into three main categories according to funding: national, public and private. National institutions receive funding directly from central government. Public institutions receive funding from prefectural or municipal government. Private institutions rely for the most part on tuition fees, although they may also have some funding through grants or tax breaks from government. Note which funding model predominates at which level of the education system.

Compulsory education is the nine years of elementary and junior high school. Provision of compulsory education is overwhelmingly at the public level. If the state expects children to be in school during these years, the state has to provide places for children to go to school.

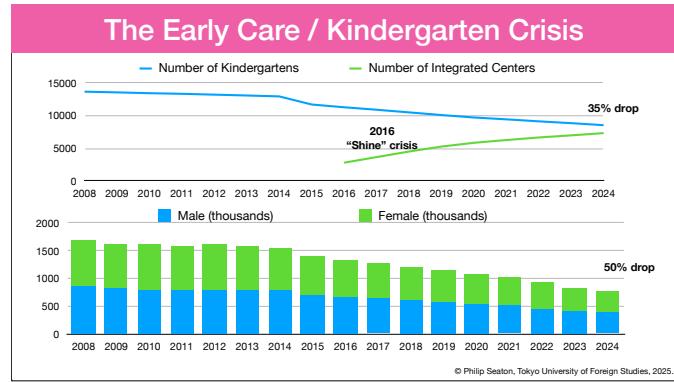
By contrast, kindergartens and early childcare and learning centres are predominantly private. Childcare has traditionally been considered the role of the extended family. But, with more and more parents now in two-generation nuclear families, childcare

has become a major social issue. Even with a declining birthrate there are insufficient childcare places. Indeed, this lack of childcare places is probably a cause of the declining birthrate. Many working mothers cannot get their children into childcare or kindergartens. This forces them to choose either children or career. However, creating extra capacity by building more kindergartens and training more nursery teachers requires a lot of time and money.



This issue became a major topic of debate in 2016 when an anonymous mother who could not get childcare posted on social media a message saying *Nihon Shine*, or Die Japan. This was a reference to a speech by prime minister Abe to the United Nations in 2013 in which he said he wanted to create “a society in which women would shine”. The frustrated mother’s wordplay changed “women shine” into “Japan shine”. I encourage you to read her blog post in full. It is in the *Mainichi* Newspaper article linked from the class webpage.

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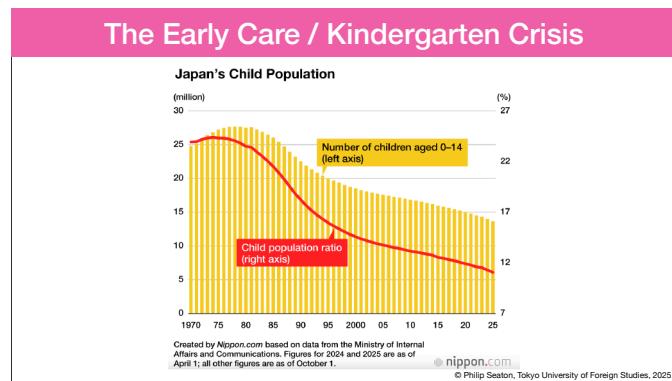
This moment of crisis for the government in 2016 clearly led to firm action. In the Statistical Handbook data, from 2016 there is a new category within the number of educational institutions called Integrated Centers for Early Childhood Education and Care. The data first appears in 2016, and shows a continual rise to the present. This is the green line on the top graph. This indicates that the government has made it a policy priority. During the same period the number of births in Japan actually dropped from 977,242 in 2016 to 686,061 in 2024. A rise in childcare facilities cannot simply be a result of increasing demand from more babies! Such a clear rise is part of the government’s policy to reverse depopulation and increase the number of births by strengthening or rationalizing early child care infrastructure. It has not worked yet, though ...

The deeper, long-term problem is seen by looking at kindergarten data. These facilities cover pre-school education from ages three to five. The graphs show the numbers of kindergartens and children at kindergartens. Kindergartens dropped from 13,626 in 2008 to 8,530 in 2024. This is the blue line on the top graph. In other words, over a third of Japan’s kindergartens have closed in the last 15 years. The number of children attending kindergarten, shown in the bottom graph, has dropped by over 50%. Given that kindergartens are mostly private businesses you can understand why crashing numbers of children lead

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to kindergarten closures.

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And the data in the graph shows how the population of children under 14 has dropped since the 1980s both in absolute numbers, and as a proportion of the total population. It is now 11.1% of the total population, or one in nine people.

See original data here: <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h02400>

Despite government efforts, therefore, we can see the vicious spiral within Japan's shrinking population. With pre-school care predominantly in the private section, a shrinking population is a shrinking market. Government intervention, even if clear and targeted, has its limitations.

## Private and Public Education

Table 16.1  
Educational Institutions in Japan (as of May 1, 2024)

Type of institution	Number of schools			Full-time teachers (1,000 persons)		Students (1,000 persons)	
	Total	National	Public	Private	Males	Females	
Kindergartens .....	8,530	47	2,534	5,949	83	381	377
Integrated centers for early childhood education and care ...	7,321		1,014	6,306	149	437	420
Elementary schools .....	18,922	87	18,033	249	423	3,037	2,897
Lower secondary schools .....	9,882	68	9,023	781	247	1,606	1,535
Compulsory education schools .....	238	5	232	1	8	41	39
Upper secondary schools .....	4,774	15	3,438	1,321	223	1,482	1,425
Secondary schools .....	59	4	35	20	3	17	18
Schools for special needs education <sup>1)</sup> .....	1,191	45	1,130	16	89	104	52
Colleges of technology .....	298	51	274	4	43	13	
Junior colleges .....	297	7	15	282	6	11	67
Universities .....	813	86	103	624	193	1,630	1,320
Graduate schools .....	663	86	91	486	108	182	90
Specialized training colleges .....	2,997	8	178	2,811	39	266	344
Miscellaneous schools .....	998	-	5	993	9	57	50

1) Schools for mentally and/or physically challenged children, inclusive of kindergarten to upper secondary school levels.

Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. © Philip Seston, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Now let's return to this table. Let's look next at high school education.

In Japan, well over 90 percent of junior high school students go on to senior high school. At this level, public schools still outnumber private schools. But, there are far more private senior high schools. There are many private schools affiliated with private universities, and many parents want to put their children through private school in order to give them the best possible chance of entering a good university.

By the university level, the vast majority of institutions are private. The same is true for specialised training schools, or *senmon gakko*. I will talk more about universities a little later.

For now there is just one more category to look at: schools for special needs education. These schools educate children with disabilities and are overwhelmingly public. Education of those with disabilities is not something that can be easily left to capitalist market forces. The money and time required to look after a disabled child mean that the government really needs to

be active in providing support.

## Education as Right and/or Privilege

Table 16.1 Educational Institutions in Japan (as of May 1, 2024)									
Type of institution	Number of schools			Full-time teachers (1,000 persons)		Students (1,000 persons)		Males	Females
	Total	National	Public	Private	persons	83	381		
Kindergartens .....	8,530	47	2,534	5,949	1,040	6,306	149	437	420
Integrated centers for early education and care .....	7,822	67	18,506	249	422	3,037	2,265		
Elementary schools .....	9,882	68	9,023	781	247	1,606	1,535		
Lower secondary schools .....	238	5	232	1	8	41	39		
Compulsory education schools .....	4,774	15	3,438	1,321	223	1,482	1,425		
Upper secondary schools .....	59	4	35	20	3	17	18		
Secondary schools .....									
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1) Schools for mentally and/or physically challenged children, inclusive of kindergarten to upper secondary school levels.  
Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. © Philip Seston, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Some other ways of thinking about private and public education are these. Public education is a right, while private education is a privilege. Or, public education is an obligation while private education is a choice. Or perhaps private education is a ladder, while public education is a safety net.

Japan's education system has significant public and private sectors. The areas highlighted are the places where education is considered to be more of a privilege, choice, or ladder. This is where the private sector dominates and people pay for the privilege. The areas left white are those where education is more of a right, an obligation or a safety net. Senior high schools are about one quarter private and three quarters public. But I have highlighted them in the slide because private high schools are such a significant proportion of education at this age level.

When the education system is viewed in this way, we see why a lot of the discussion of Japan's education system being egalitarian is partly true, and partly nonsense. It is partly true because there is similar access across the country to free compulsory education. Japan's elementary and junior high schools are famous for providing uniform levels of education. But,

it is partly nonsense because going to kindergarten, high school and university all require lots of money. And let's not forget that most children also go to private cram schools, or juku, in preparation for entrance exams. So, ultimately the ability to progress up through Japan's education system is highly dependent on family wealth, and we have already learned how Japan is a *kakusa* society with great divisions in wealth. Graduation from a good university is required to get into Japan's most secure and well paid jobs. Getting into a good university costs a lot of money. Japan's education system, therefore, reproduces the class and wealth divisions within Japanese society. However, this is a characteristic of every country's education system to a certain extent.

## Higher Education

Table 16.1  
Educational Institutions in Japan (as of May 1, 2024)

Type of institution	Number of schools			Full-time teachers (1,000 persons)		Students (1,000 persons)	
	Total	National	Public	Private	Males	Females	
Kindergartens .....	8,530	47	2,534	5,949	83	381	377
Integrated centers for early childhood education and care ...	7,321		1,014	6,306	149	437	420
Elementary schools .....	18,622	67	18,033	249	423	3,037	2,597
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1) Schools for mentally and/or physically challenged children, inclusive of kindergarten to upper secondary school levels.

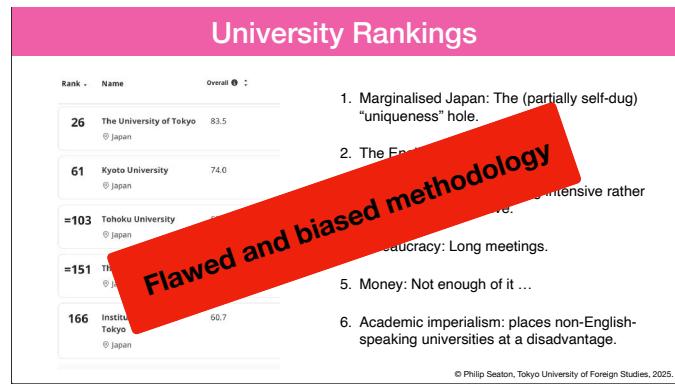
Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. © Philip Seston, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Let's now turn to the university sector. This is where the issues of privilege are perhaps clearest to see. The aim of Japanese education often seems to be to get into a prestigious university so you can get into a prestigious job.

The first thing to say about the Japanese university system is that there are lots and lots of universities. In fact, one might say that there are too many universities. Many will probably go bankrupt as Japan's population shrinks. Nevertheless, in 2024 there were 813 universities and 297 junior colleges. There were also 2997 specialised training colleges. Almost 60 percent of young people continue to some form of higher education after completing 12 years of schooling. Believe it or not, the number of universities in Japan is increasing! But this is mainly because junior colleges and specialized training colleges try to "upgrade" into a university. Conversely, the numbers of junior colleges and specialized training colleges are falling.

But, of Japan's universities the ones that matter most are those which create a path into the highest-status jobs. In particular, the 86 national universities and around 20-30 elite private universities are considered to be the goal at the end of high school education. There is something of a myth about Japanese university education that students use it as four years of play time,

asobi, after entrance exam hell. That might be the case at lower ranking universities, but not at the three national universities where I have taught: Nagaoka University of Technology, Hokkaido University, and TUFS. I think we push students really quite hard.



But, despite the highly prestigious nature of the universities within Japan, in global perspective the universities rank very low. The most commonly cited international university rankings are produced by Times Higher Education. In the 2026 rankings, for example, the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University appear in the top 100, and Tohoku University is at number 103. But everyone else is well below that. To be honest however, Japan's universities bounce up and down depending on little adjustments to how the rankings are calculated. Even so, these results are poor for the world's number three economy.

But there are various reasons for Japan's poor rankings performance.

The first is that Japan is very good at marginalising itself and being marginalised by others. All the talk of Japanese uniqueness means that people think it is OK to ignore what is going on in Japan. Japan needs to think and act internationally to do well in international rankings.

Next is the English barrier. You need to publish most research in English to do well in these rankings. Japan is at a severe

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disadvantage here compared to Anglophone countries.

The third issue is the workplace culture at universities. Actually, this is very good for you, our students. Our job as academics is primarily to teach you. If you go to an American university, most of your classes are taught by part-time lecturers or graduate students. This is what gives the full time professors the space to publish the research that improves their universities' rankings. University rankings basically reflect research output more than teaching. Japanese universities are more education oriented. That's good for students, but bad for rankings.

Next, Japanese universities are very bureaucratic. Staff spend lots of time on administration and meetings. I wish I had fewer, shorter meetings.

The next problem is that there is relatively little money in Japanese higher education compared to other countries. And did you know that national university budgets are being cut by 1% a year? We have to apply for more and more short-term competitive grants just to maintain staff levels. The public sector is gradually and deliberately being hollowed out.

And finally, there is significant academic imperialism involved in rankings. The rankings are produced in the English-speaking world in a way that clearly benefits English speaking universities. One might even say they are designed to place non-English-speaking countries at a disadvantage and create the image that many of the best universities are English-speaking.

Personally, I dislike rankings intensely for their flawed and biased methodology, and the negative effect they have on driving educational policy towards competition between institutions and nations. But, they are part of our lives and not going away. The important thing is this. Before you ever use rankings of any kind, look very carefully at their methodology and understanding exactly what they measure. Change a few components of the rankings calculations and you can completely change the orders. If universities were ranked by the number of contact hours that students have with tenured professors during their degrees, Japanese universities would do very well indeed!

## Japanese Education Passes/Fails

- Japan scores **high** on:
  - Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
  - Consistent access to high quality compulsory education across the country.
- Japan scores **low** on:
  - Critical thinking and practical knowledge use (e.g. environmental awareness survey results).
  - English speaking ability ... ahem ...
  - International outlook in higher education.

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So, let me sum up by saying which parts of the Japanese education system get a pass grade, and which parts receive a “try harder” grade.

Japanese education scores highly in two main areas.

The first is in general scholastic achievement across the whole population. In measures such as literacy and mathematics, Japanese children score highly in international comparisons. See the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for more details on this.

A second area is in equal access to education. I made some critical comments earlier about how the Japanese education system can reinforce class inequality. However, during the nine years of compulsory education Japanese kids have remarkably equal access to good quality education. This is why the PISA scores are high. Japan also scores very well in gender equality in education. In previous lectures we have heard that Japan is ranked very low in gender equality when it comes to politics,

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business leadership and the workplace. However, in terms of access to education, Japanese women do very well in international comparison.

OK, those were the good bits. Now for the less good bits.

Whereas Japanese students perform well on standardised international tests, there are often doubts raised about the levels of critical thinking and practical uses of knowledge. The government is trying to address this at the moment by changing the examination style from factual recall type questions to critical reasoning questions. Perhaps one manifestation of this lack of practical knowledge is in a UNICEF report from 2017. This found that Japanese 15-year olds came 36th out of 37 countries in terms of environmental awareness. According to the Mainichi newspaper “... while Japanese students' basic academic skills are high, there is little attention paid to real-world issues in the classroom. Only 44.4 percent of Japanese students had some knowledge of the [environmental] issue and could generally explain it or were very knowledgeable about the issue”. Well, not in my classroom. I expect you all to think critically and to be highly informed about environment issues by the time we have finished this course!

The second area of great weakness is English ability. One of the great mysteries of the Japanese education system is how so much time and money can be spent learning English, but still Japanese students rank so poorly for English ability. I am glad to say Gaigodai students are the exception, but I am sure you are all familiar with this problem.

And finally, as I said, I dislike university rankings. But they do point to a fundamental need in Japanese higher education to be more globally engaged. Given its position as the world's third largest economy, Japan's contribution to global debate is limited. I hope you will all consider what you can do about that before you complete your education in Japan.

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## Education: What's the point?

- (A) To give you the ability to pass exams and get you to the next stage of your life?
- (B) To give you the training and skills that will make you a useful employee for an organization or company?
- (C) To develop your ability to think so that you can cope with situations and challenges you will encounter in the future?
- (D) To turn you into a good and loyal citizen who will contribute something of use to society?
- (E) To help you discover yourself as a person?

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Let me leave you with one final thought ... What is the real point of your education? Is it:

- A) To give you the ability to pass exams and get you to the next stage of your life?
- B) To give you the training and skills that will make you a useful employee for an organization or company?
- C) To develop your ability to think so that you can cope with situations and challenges you will encounter in the future?
- D) To turn you into a good and loyal citizen who will contribute something of use to society?
- E) To help you discover yourself as a person?

Actually, all of these options are partially correct. But, which is your priority? I think you will get much more benefit from your

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time at TUFS if you have a clear answer in your own head about why your education is important to you. By the way, can you guess what my answer is for you? In other words, what do I hope to give you as your teacher?