

Addressing a Changing Labor Economy in Japan through Integrating Secretarial Education, the YES Program (Basic Skills for Full-Fledged Members of Society), and Business Certification Exams into Universities

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(Abstract)

Recent changes in the labor environment, changing attitudes towards careers, and increases in permanent part-time workers and NEETs (those “Not currently involved in Employment, Education, and Training”) are major social issues in Japan. There is a pressing need to foster self-understanding and a strong work ethic among young people today. One strategy has been to introduce career education into the university system.¹

Here, we explore the possibilities and challenges presented by expanding career education at the university level. We will discuss orientation sessions and skills development, and the integration of secretarial education, the YES Program, and business certification examinations into career education programs. We propose that integrating these programs may enhance the career consciousness of university students and instill in them the essential skills and attitudes commonly sought by employers.

Key terms: career education, secretary education, YES Program, business certification examinations, approaches taken by universities

1.Introduction

With the rapid introduction of new technologies and a changing economy, there have been major shifts in hiring and labor in Japan. The ways people work and think about work are also undergoing a massive transformation. These changes have been accompanied by large increases in the numbers of permanent part-timers, NEETs (those “Not currently involved in Employment, Education, and Training”). As a result, there is an increasing need to strengthen self-understanding and work ethic among young adults. One strategy is to provide career education programs at the university level, which an increasing number of universities have been introducing.¹ Additionally, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry have begun to take various steps to support career education.² The results of their efforts, however, cannot yet be fully gauged.

Here, we discuss career education at the university level, and assess the effectiveness of approaches to career education such as secretarial education, the YES program, and business certification examinations. We also delineate the skills that can be acquired through these programs.

Although many preliminary studies on career education have been conducted in the past two years, the field of career education in Japan is only in its infancy.³ In this paper, we aim address this gap, and assess the feasibility and effectiveness of secretarial education, the YES program, and business certification examinations in the context of university career education. We aim to create a valuable reference not only for our own institution, but also for career education programs at other universities throughout the country.

2. Career Education Programs at the University-Level⁴

(1) Career

The term “career” is generally used to describe one’s professional lifestyle, including aspects of one’s occupation, specialized trade skills, and work history. Watanabe (2004⁵), defines a career as “a specific job or role that an individual strives to advance while experiencing infinite options. It is something an individual creates. One’s career cannot be separated from their family life, their life as a citizen, or their leisure time; rather, all of these things influence each other... It means the world of individual experience generated through the interaction of work and life, the way of living constructed through working.”

In the Japanese context, Kanai (2002, 2003⁶) hypothesizes that the reason that the English loanword “career” is used in Japanese is that the expression “patterns and meanings of work life seen in the long-term” would be too long, and that career means “a path that is useful for realizing future prospects as well as for reflection on the past.” In addition, it can be defined as follows: “within the long-term working life that unfolds once an adult begins working full time as the basis for one’s entire life, continuity in experiences of specific professional duties, job types, and abilities, and patterns of retrospective meaningfulness and future concepts and prospects, that are brought into being by the choices made at major turning points.” From these perspectives, “career” can be defined succinctly as “a way of living that is built and conceptualized through the act of working.”

(2) Career Education

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (1999, 2003⁷), “Career education is education that fosters a work ethic and sense of professionalism, supports career development, and helps cultivate the drive, attitude, and ability necessary for developing a career appropriate for the individual.” Career education helps to cultivate “a sense of professionalism and work ethic” as well as “the ability and attitude to take initiative in choosing a career.” Effective career education should therefore not only help to develop occupational skills and the will to work, but must also instill in students the recognition that they are independent and contributing members in society, as financial,

social, and spiritual independence is obtained. Gaining independence from one's parents is a major part of this process, and only after this has been achieved is it possible for one to set up a household, shoulder the responsibility to pay taxes and social security, and even participate in social and political activities. Tanaka (2005⁸) proposes that career education within the context of higher education is "self-building education that, through the use of contextual pedagogy involving practical training, experimentation, and work experience such as internships, encourages self-understanding in line with one's level of development and choice of a career, thereby allowing students to obtain information about potential careers."

In light of these views, we define career education as "education that provides adequate career- and occupation-related information, deepens an individual's self-understanding, and supports social independence, while fostering the skills and attitudes necessary to actively choose a career path."

3. Background and Significance

The following four points highlight recent changes in social and employment conditions:

1. Changes in the Hiring Environment

Since the economic bubble burst, there has been a strong movement towards evaluating personnel based on their performance. Unfortunately, high unemployment rates¹¹, early job separation (attrition from the workplace)¹², and the increase in non-regular employment¹³ have been identified as serious problems among young people in the workforce. Thus, although the 2007 fiscal year showed some signs of the employment situation improving due to the large-scale retirement of baby boomers⁹, the situation remains severe in the sense that companies are unable to find enough qualified applicants who have the basic skills demanded of adult members of society.¹⁰

2. Changes in Life and Career Planning Responsibilities

In recent years, planning one's life and career has become an individual, rather than a corporate, responsibility.¹¹ An increasing number of companies with performance-based personnel evaluation systems are placing the responsibility for skills development on the individual employees. As the necessary education and training for jobs becomes more specialized and individualized, it is becoming more difficult to implement uniform education and training, as was done in the past. In addition, trends such as the flattening out of organizations and having dual-track careers are also increasing. In order to keep pace with these changes, new employees must be able to facilitate and develop their careers according to their individual needs.

3. Changes in Career Consciousness Among Young People

According to the "Survey of Attitudes Towards Careers,"¹² the most commonly reported objectives for

working are “to live a comfortable life,” “to lead an economically prosperous life,” and “to continually challenge and improve skills and abilities.” In a survey conducted in Autumn 2007¹⁸ that examined the attitudes of new employees, 34.6 % reported that they hoped to work in their current company for their entire lives, which was a four-year high. When analyzed by generation, however, it was revealed that younger workers were significantly more opposed to becoming “company men.”¹⁹ Consistent with this report is the fact that an increasing number of companies have recently noticed a decline in young employees’ sense of belonging to the company.¹³

4. A Decline in the Scholastic Abilities of University Students

While no empirical analyses are available to prove that the overall academic ability of university students has declined, universities are unable to provide evidence sufficient to dispel this impression for those in the business world.¹⁴ The observed lack of scholastic aptitude²², communication skills²³, and basic social etiquette in young people today is nothing new. Compounding this problem is the fact that, with few exceptions, universities are experiencing significant decreases in applicants. These universities are currently faced with the responsibility of having to balance their overall mission to provide higher education with the responsibility of providing guidance regarding their post-graduate career paths.

According to Tōyama (2004¹⁵), the Japanese university system was constructed according to the model of the European-style research-centered universities, with the establishment of the first national university in 1877 as well as the organization of a dual-track system of higher education that incorporated various trade specialty schools. After World War II, however, Japan was forced to carry out large-scale reforms of the education system in a short period of time under the powerful influence of the United States. Consequently, there was a great deal of confusion regarding the objectives of the university system, much of which resulted from the unification and integration of schools required by the new education system.

It is likely that the delay in introducing occupational education into universities was a result of disagreements between students of diverse backgrounds and qualifications, and teachers unable to let go of ideals from the old university system. Fortunately, current ideals now strongly embrace the notion that the concentrated effort to increase career consciousness in all students is an important pillar of university education.

4. Japan’s Career Education Programs: Standards, Surveys, and Recommendations

Okita and Okui (2005¹⁶) reported that many of the students who are worried about not having determined a career path lack basic knowledge of the real world, the working world, and of the career options available to them. They suggest that helping students acquire this type of fundamental knowledge may give them the freedom to explore their options, as well as align their inherent skills and desires with the career paths available to them. To address these types of career-related concerns in young people, it is

necessary to define the standards and goals considered in Japan's career education. Here, we provide a simple overview of the major standards, surveys, and recommendations that may serve as guidelines to promote career education programs at the university level (Table 1).

5. Skills Acquired Through Secretarial Education, the YES Program, and the Business Certification Exam

(1) Secretarial Education

Secretarial education has a history in Japan dating back almost 100 years. Regarding secretarial education at universities and two-year colleges, Nishizawa (1998¹⁷) noted that during a period of rapid growth in the 1960's, an increasing number of women were hired in the workplace, and with this came the increased need for business education for women. Following this, women's business education at specialty schools and two-year colleges, which centered on the reception of clients, gradually came to be known as secretarial education. When the establishment of departments of secretarial education was authorized in 1980, secretarial education became a solid component of career education at two- and four-year colleges, and developed rapidly thereafter.¹⁸

The utility of secretarial education¹⁹ has been discussed widely. Omiya (2006²⁰) states that secretarial education teaches students about all aspects of business, starting from the basics. He claims that, because secretarial education teaches the secretary or administrative assistant as an individual professional, it not only imparts various occupational skills, but also allows individuals to set goals for their own career development. Furthermore, because secretaries regularly work alongside top management personnel and serve as assistants, they are able to obtain a clearer sense of the organization and industrial tendencies of the company.

We have outlined the skills identified in the report by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology²¹ that we deem essential for enhancing career education, with the fields of study generally included in college secretarial education ("General Theory of Secretarial Education" and "Secretary Business, etc."²²) (Table 2). Based on these results, it is clear that secretarial education equips students with the majority of skills that characterize and comprise successful career education, according to the standards of the Ministry of Education. The two shaded items in Table 2 are exceptions to this trend. This supports the hypothesis that secretarial education is an invaluable form of career education, as it exemplifies in the specific professional model of the secretary and how one must acquire the attitudes and occupational skills necessary to work in society. This form of education also ameliorates problems related to lack of future planning, as it encourages setting goals and thinking about things in concrete terms, two skills commonly found among many students who have gone through secretarial education programs.²³

Table 1: Major Projects, Studies, and Proposals Related to Career Education (University Level)			
Date	Title of Project or Proposal	Relevant Ministry or Organization	Summary
2/1999	Improving the Connection Linking Primary and Secondary Education to Higher Education (Connection Report)	Ministry of Education	The first report in Japan to propose the idea of career education. Career education is defined as "Education that, in order to ensure a smooth transition between school education and education through work, instills in students an appropriate work ethic and sense of professionalism, and the needed skills and attitudes for the workplace, while also fostering the skills and attitudes to understand themselves as individuals and actively choose their career path."
6/2003	Youth Independence and Challenge Plan (Strategy Conference)	Cabinet Office/Ministry of Education/ Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare/ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry	In light of the increase in permanent part-time workers and unemployed young people, the objective of this plan was to promote the professional independence of motivated youth over a three-year period. It declared that the government and private sectors would work in tandem to implement comprehensive measures for the cultivation of human resources. This subsequently led to the development of various policies related to the employment of youth, based on the 2004 "Youth Independence and Challenge Action Plan."
1/2004	Comprehensive Survey of the Promotion of Career Education. (Researchers Conference Report)	Ministry of Education	Redefined career education as "education that supports the development of each individual's career, and fosters the will, attitude, and skills necessary to build a career appropriate to each individual." Provided schools and educators with indicators to be used in the promotion of career education, in order to achieve the advancement and enrichment of such programs.
4/2004	Japanese Dual System	Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare	An education and training policy integrating both practical training within companies and classroom lectures at educational institutions, in order to provide support for career-building and employment-seeking from the educational stage to the workplace. This was a new system for the cultivation of human resources aimed at creating full-fledged professionals through "learning while working" and "working while learning."

6/2004	Proposal for Fostering the Next Generation to Live Through the 21 st Century (Next Generation Proposal)	Japan Federation of Economic Organizations	<p>This was the business world's request to universities for an enrichment of undergraduate education and introduction of a curriculum instilling in students a motivation to seek specialized education. The three characteristics demanded by the business world were "Will and Mind (The power to uphold the standards of a member of society and to approach all things with a sense of mission)," "The power of action (the ability to overcome hardships and reach one's goals through the acquisition of information, negotiation, and coordination)," and "The power of intellect (the ability to inquire deeply and think through things)."</p>
11/2004	Results of the Survey of the Professional Talent Sought by Companies	Japan Federation of Economic Organizations	<p>Following up on the Next Generation Proposal, this was an evaluation of recent students to ascertain the degree to which the three abilities recommended were applied to the hiring of new graduates. It also surveyed companies' educational expectations of universities.</p>
2/2006	Research Group on Basic Abilities for Members of Society (Interim report, YES Program)	Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry	<p>Speaking from the standpoint of securing and fostering the human resources necessary to carry out economic activity in Japan, this group stated that it was necessary to clarify the skills needed in the workplace, i.e. the "Basic Abilities for Members of Society" and presented a way for both industry and educational institutions to work together to foster and evaluate those abilities. Basic Abilities for Members of Society refers to the basic skills necessary to work alongside diverse people in an organization or community. Basic scholastic abilities include reading, writing, arithmetic, and basic IT skills. Basic social skills include communication skills, the ability to get things done, and a proactive nature. Specialized skills are the knowledge and qualifications necessary for any given profession.</p>
4/2006	Plan for Practical and Comprehensive Career Education	Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare	<p>This was part of the program to support activities aimed at meeting modern educational needs, under the 2004 plan to "Support University Reform in National, Public, and Private Universities." The objective was to foster a high level of professional consciousness and ability among university students, and support efforts to implement practical and systematic career education.</p>

Table 2: Areas of Abilities That Can be Acquired Through Career Education and their Connections to Secretarial Education, the YES Program, and Business Certification Examinations					
Area of Abilities	Explanation of Area and Ability	Attitudes and Abilities enhanced by projects	Secretarial Education (General Theory of Secretarial Education and Secretary Work)	YES Program (Basic Employability)	Business Certification Examinations (YES Program Certification)
<1> Human Relations	To value the individuality of others, realize one's own individuality, communicate with others, and work in cooperation and collaboration with others: -Ability to understand others and oneself -Communication skills	(1) Encouraging self-understanding (2) Understanding the importance of manners and etiquette (3) Learning how to communicate to build better human relations (4) Understanding other cultures (5) Learning a specialized field at university and expanding the world of knowledge	(1) Theory of secretarial professional ability -Secretary's role, duties, characteristics of those duties, ways of advancing those duties -Schedule management -Conferences, meetings, and business trips (2) Secretary qualifications and prerequisites (efforts to improve qualifications, knowledge and skills, personality, etc.) (3) Secretaries and communication	(1) Communication skills: -Communication -Cooperation -Self expression (2) Professional attitude: -Sense of responsibility -Initiative -Troubleshooting ability -Work ethic	(Basic #1) -Customer Service Qualifying Exam Level 3 -Business manners exam, Level 3 (Applied #2) -Business Aptitude Exam Level 2 -Customer Service Qualifying Exam Level 2 -Business manners exam Level 2 -Secretarial Skills Certification Exam Level 2
		(1) Learning how to collect information effectively (2) Making use of all opportunities to collect information (3) Building networking ability	-Communication within the office (verbal and non-verbal communication) -Way of speaking, use of words (Polite and humble speech, words for use in reception of others) -Telephone reception- Reception of visitors and visits to other companies	(3) Business manners: -Basic manners (4) Basic scholastic ability: -Reading -Writing -Mental arithmetic -Common sense	(Applied) -Secretarial Skills Certification Exam, Pre-1 (Basic) -Business writing skills exam Level 3 (Applied) -Business Aptitude Level 2 -Business writing, Level 2
<2> Information Acquisition and Utilization	Understanding the meaning and diversity of learning and working, utilizing information for a wide range of uses, using it to choose one's career path and way of life: -Information collection -Searching ability -Vocational understanding				

<p><3> Future Planning</p>	<p>Ability to maintain one's hopes and dreams and think about one's future way of living and lifestyle, and proactively make plans for the future based on social realities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ascertaining one's role -Cognitive abilities -Ability to put one's plans into practice 	<p>(1) Understanding of the economic situation (2) Learning about the structure of companies and organizations (3) Considering the meaning of life and work (including the value of life and work) (4) Thinking about diverse ways of working (labor markets and capital) and ways of managing work and family life (including the issue of gender and labor) (5) Acquiring knowledge about labor contracts and the rights of workers</p> <p>(7) Experiencing internships</p> <p>(8) Making a career and life plan and creating a career design based on these</p>	<p>(4) Internet society and secretaries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -E-mail, intranet, information searches, information ethics -Business writing and correspondence -Filing work <p>(5) Secretaries' interpersonal networking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding various forms of employment, understanding of self and others, understanding people at the workplace, building an interpersonal network -Congratulations, condolences, and gift-giving <p>(6) Secretaries and career-building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Life cycle and career building (career development and life-long learning) (7) Changes in the business environment, problems facing secretaries and prospects for secretaries 	<p>(5) Acquiring qualifications (qualifications related to information technologies):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Economic and financial qualifications -Language qualifications 	<p>(Basic)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Business computing exam Level 1 -Level 3 -JCCI PC Exam (data utilization) Levels 1, 2, 3 -Bookkeeping certification exam levels 1, 2, 3 -TOEIC score between 425 and 500 -TOEIC Bridge score above 170 -Eiken (English Comprehension) 3/Pre-2/Pre-1/Level 1 (Applied) -Business computing level 1, 2, 3 -Bookkeeping certification exam levels 1,2,3 -TOEIC score above 500, Eiken (English Comprehension) level3/Pre-2/2/Pre-1/1
<p><4> Decision-Making</p>	<p>To make better decisions and choices based on one's own will and responsibility, and to work actively to overcome the problems and conflicts arising in this process</p>				

(2) YES Program²⁴

As shown in Table 1, in 2004 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology began the Youth Employability Support Program (YES Program). The program provides information about the courses and examination qualifications²⁵ at private education and training institutions (including universities and two-year colleges) based on each institution's application requirements. Additionally, the program enables students to acquire five basic employment skills required by companies: 1) communication skills, 2) professional attitude, 3) business etiquette, 4) basic scholastic ability, and 5) general qualifications for employment. Those who have completed the courses and passed the examination are awarded a certificate confirming their acquisition of basic youth employability skills.

Companies are able to use these certificates as a basis for objective evaluation of candidates, in order to hire employees with the required qualifications. The advantage of awarding these certificates to young people is that it empowers them to promote themselves during the hiring process and boosts their self-confidence as they approach employment examinations. The primary goals of this program are to raise the employability of young people as well as to create a common employability standard to be used both by those hiring and by those seeking job opportunities. Beginning this fiscal year, we plan to incorporate this program in parts of our university and two-year college curriculum. Judging by the content of the YES Program, we predict that many of the skills we hope to teach through the YES Program may overlap with those taught by secretarial education.

(3) Qualification Examinations for Businesses and Corporations

Although successful completion of the various business qualification and certification examinations does not necessarily guarantee employment, the experience of studying diligently and successfully passing the exam instills self-confidence that is useful as many youth face upcoming employment examinations.

At our institution's Extension Center, we have initiated numerous strategies to help students prepare for the business qualification and certification exams. A large number of our students have taken these courses and successfully passed examinations. Our certification exam for the YES Program (YES Program Certification) is an example of one of the programs implemented at the Extension Center (Table 2). Each of the certification exams offered would undoubtedly prove useful in various business scenarios. Although there is no ranking among the qualifying exams, it could be argued that one advantage of the secretarial skills certification exam is that its questions realistically depict workplace situations, so that students for whom part-time jobs are their only work experience are more easily able to envision situations arising in a more corporate setting.

We believe that studying for and taking examinations for career-related subjects will help to enhance the overall quality of career education.

Here we have considered the individual merits of career education, secretarial education, the

YES Program, and business skills examination. However, we would strongly suggest that universities administering these programs should integrate all four programs, rather than considering each program in isolation. This integrated approach is more likely to be successful in enhancing the career consciousness of students enrolled in these courses, and instill in them the basic abilities sought by employers.

6. Future Goals

We have presented an overview of the background and current situation of career education at the university level, and discussed the skills students may expect to acquire from secretarial education, the YES Program, and business certification exams. University students currently seeking employment face many serious challenges. However, students who actively take part in these programs are greatly satisfied with the results. The key question for future career support programs, therefore, is how to awaken students' interest and recruit them to actively participate in such programs.

In order to ensure successful career education, it is crucial to clarify both the degree to which career-related curricula are meeting students' objectives, as well as the degree to which students are reaching their own career goals. Career support programs must be evaluated based on these criteria. We are currently administering career education at our own institution, but as of yet, there have not been any discussions regarding the efficacy of introducing such programs, the process by which the curriculum is developed, or the approaches to such education. We look forward to discussing such research questions in the future.

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Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training “The changing corporate society and future issues for corporations, individuals and society”
 - 10 Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training “The changing corporate society and future issues for corporations, individuals and society,” 2004. A report by the Central Council of Education has duly pointed out the disjuncture

and mismatched between the skills that universities try to impart to students and the skills desired by companies. Furthermore, in recent years it has been widely noted that companies want graduates to be ready to work immediately, and against the backdrop, the efforts by universities to focus on employment-seeking strategies, for instance by encouraging students to obtain qualifications, is truly striking. Yet, it is said that what companies are looking for in students are basic skills and general versatility, and the demand for skills that can be applied to business immediately after beginning work applies mainly to mid-career hires. Central Council for Education Subdivision on University Curriculum and College Undergraduate Education "Toward the reconstruction of undergraduate education (report of council proceedings)" September 18, 2007.

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