

# Chapter 1

## Revising the Course of Study for the New Knowledge Society



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**Abstract** The new course of study, set for implementation from 2020 onward, introduces new subjects and, perhaps more importantly, a new vision for teaching generally referred to as ‘active learning’ and a reorientation of assessment towards growth. It aims to equip children with the thinking skills and competencies required in the ‘new knowledge society’ of the present and near future. This book examines the new course of study, from the debates and socio-political realities that provided space for such unprecedented reform, to the intended and unintended outcomes of the new requirements, both in each school subject and across the education system, against the context of education policy debates and reform in Japan over the past 30 years. The book also follows policy into the school and classroom to provide case studies of the potential and the challenges of the new course of study on the ground. Finally, the book draws on theory to consider the possible future of active learning and the direction of change for the next course of study.

**Keywords** Course of study · Active learning · Japanese education · Education reform

Japan’s school curriculum has traditionally had great influence on school and classroom practice. The course of study provides a framework of teaching and learning expectations for all regular schools in Japan. It provides a complete and relatively coherent framework of course content, assessment approaches, and pedagogical expectations, each revision of which is based on almost a decade of deliberation. The course of study is drafted by elite policymakers, with a degree of consultation with educators, select sectoral interests and civic society. It is also increasingly influenced by global policy. Its prominence in practice and its completeness as a vision statement from the Ministry of Education makes the course of study an important centrepiece from which to begin studies of education policy and practice. Its content,

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drafting and implementation processes also prompt important questions. First and foremost is the political context in which it is produced—who is educated, by whom and for whom. Moreover, the course of study enters the school alongside countless other policies, where existing practices and professional understandings are institutionalised. And again, the school exists in social, economic, and technological realities.

The chapters in this book examine the new course of study, from the debates and socio-political realities that provided space for such unprecedented reform, to the intended and unintended outcomes of the new requirements, both in each school subject and across the education system, against the context of the education policy debates and reform in Japan over the past 30 years. The book also follows policy into the school and classroom to provide case studies of the potential and challenges of the new course of study on the ground. Finally, the book draws on theory to consider the possible future of active learning and the direction of the course of study.

The book will examine:

1. The reasons for reform and prescriptions of the 2017 course of study.
2. The implications of its call for ‘active learning’ pedagogy for schools and classroom teaching in a range of subjects.
3. The main debates arising from the revised course of study against the broader context of Japanese education, including:
  - a. Its suitability for learning in the new knowledge society
  - b. New insights into the policymaking process
  - c. Implications for inequality.

## 1.1 What Is the Course of Study?

The course of study (COS; *gakushūshidōryō*) is the national curriculum determined by the Ministry of Education (MEXT; *Monbukagakushō*), with the aim of providing a standard of education throughout Japan. The COS is used to determine the contents required of teaching, and thus of textbooks. The general direction of education policy has been overseen by the Central Council for Education (CCE; *Chūō kyōiku shingikai*) since the establishment of the post-war political system. It also oversees subcommittees which debate and determine the contents of the COS. The CCE is an important body that sits at the apex of MEXT. Responsible directly to the Minister, it solicits opinions from select experts and interest groups and, to a lesser extent, from the general public (see Chap. 2). The new COS will take effect in 2020 for elementary schools, 2021 for junior high schools, and from 2022 for high schools. These revisions, promulgated (mostly) in 2017, mark a new departure for education, which will continue through the 2020s.

The COS is revised approximately once every ten years. This is the eighth revision of the COS since the end of the Pacific War. As in the past, the COS has been amended

in response to social, political, and economic conditions alongside the perception of issues and problems faced by and towards schools. The direction of change has seen the pendulum swing, in simple terms, between cramming and relaxation orientations, and in more nuanced directions, in terms of the expectations of school, teachers, and students and in the vision of the kind of person and society that underpins the revisions (see Chap. 3).

The 1971 revision introduced an overcrowded ‘modernised curriculum’ in response to the appetite for growth aligned to the ‘economic miracle’ of the 1960s, but this led to problems such as students being allowed to progress to the next grade without fully completing their textbooks, and increased dropout rates. In the 1980s, Japanese politicians heralded an ‘end of catch-up’ (with the West) and sought to enhance quality of life. Other changes were prompted by the background of technological change, such as the advent of digital technology in the 1990s, alongside internationalisation, the diversification of values and, domestically, a media frenzy on issues in the school environment such as bullying, truancy, and exam pressure. As a result of this, during the 1990s the COS introduced a ‘relaxed education’ (*yutori kyōiku*). It drastically reduced the number of class hours and trimmed the content to be learned. This was intended to provide children and students ‘room to grow’, to not only learn but to find practical applications of knowledge in a more fulfilling life. This was a major turning point in Japanese education, as the trend prior to this revision was increasing hours of academic study. However, this would be ultimately the COS’s lowest ebb in volume.

The release of the results of the 2003 PISA exams created a widespread perception that Japan had fallen in its world rankings, providing ammunition for sceptics to fan discontent about the move towards relaxed education. As a result, the 2008 COS increased the number of class hours to their highest for about 30 years and adopted a ‘reverse course on relaxed education’ (*datsu-yutori*). This brought complexity to the strapline of the COS: ‘zest for living’ (*ikiru-chikara*), confirming its status as a container term, created by MEXT to house a vision of education, not free of internal contradictions and open to modification. It emphasised the need to strike a balance between the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills by students and the development of their ability to think, judge, and express themselves. This plan now aims to build a ‘solid academic basics and key competencies’ by

- escaping from binary oppositions such as ‘relaxed education’ and ‘education for cramming’;
- reconsidering core subjects; and
- introducing ‘active learning’ for fostering new student competencies and abilities.

In part, the ‘escape from binary oppositions’ was a semantic fudge: calling for more rigour in academic basics whilst denying the ‘cramming’, and calling for more development in thinking skills without providing the time to achieve it alongside the increased amount of content. It also opened the door to further challenges discussed in later chapters.

## 1.2 The Advent of the Knowledge-based Society and the Perceived Need for Revision

The twenty-first century is said to hail the advent of a new knowledge society, in which new learning is essential to all forms of production and active engagement with society, including politics, economics, and culture. A knowledge-based society is one in which change is rapid, and in which we are constantly required to respond to new and unknown challenges. To be able to survive in such a society, children in Japan are required to improve their ability to think, make decisions, and express themselves. It is a society in which new knowledge, information, and technology are becoming increasingly important as the basis for activities in all areas of society, including politics, economics, and culture. Following the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) group of advanced economies, such knowledge is placed within a global order of ever-present competition and innovation, which requires shifts in old paradigms and decisive action based on ‘flexible thinking’ with greater participation by all genders and ages.

Japan’s policymaking community and the Ministry of Education has responded to this challenge by revising the course of study and reinterpreting its aim to foster a ‘zest for living’ (to use the Ministry’s English-language term). In order for children to thrive in such a society, the Japanese government insists on the importance of cognitive skills, such as knowledge and memorisation, as well as non-cognitive and social skills, such as human compassion, the ability to encourage and empathise with others, and in organisations, cooperation and dialogue. In addition, the Japanese government and MEXT want children to have the ability to communicate in a questioning and interactive way, to discover issues from their own point of view and to solve these issues by involving others in the process. In a world where all information is quickly becoming obsolete, children must also be able to learn to constantly update their knowledge and information. It is against this background that the COS was revised.

Japanese government officials and educational researchers have pointed out that the current educational activities in Japanese schools do not provide a clear link between the acquisition of knowledge and skills in each subject, and the problem-solving learning and inquiry activities in the school period called integrated studies; that thinking, judgement, and expression skills are not sufficiently nurtured. As such, MEXT provides detailed descriptions of ‘what skills students will develop through learning’ and ‘how these skills will be used’, in a COS drafted ‘for students’ rather than ‘for teachers’, and in which ‘thinking skills’ and other key competences receive prominence. MEXT has elevated the expectations of the COS by reviving from the 1980s the notion of a ‘third great education reform’ commensurate in magnitude to those during the Meiji period and during the post-war period.

The new course of study will form the basis of school education for approximately the decade beginning in 2020. The revision of the COS states that the curriculum should be ‘open to society’. This is based on the idea of ‘sharing the goal of creating a better society through better school education and fostering the qualities and abilities necessary to become the creators of the future in cooperation and collaboration with

society at large'. The revised COS aims to nurture the qualities and abilities that will enable students to play an active role as members of a rapidly changing society, in cooperation and collaboration with society. The new course of study introduces new subjects and, perhaps more importantly, a new vision for teaching generally referred to as 'active learning' and a reorientation of assessment towards growth. It aims to equip children with the thinking skills and competencies required in the 'new knowledge society' of the present and near future.

### 1.3 New Content

The new curriculum aims to enhance aspects of learning, partly through revisions to its content. The main tenets, paraphrased from the intentions of MEXT, are listed in this section.

1. Ensuring the development of language skills
  - The development of the ability to accurately understand and appropriately express information (in Japanese), including the reliable acquisition of vocabulary and the ability to think in terms of opinions and evidence, concrete and abstract, according to the stage of development.
  - Enrichment of language activities in each subject as a basis for learning, including writing reports on experiments, and discussing issues with a clear position and evidence.
2. Enrichment of science and mathematics education
  - In addition to maintaining the content of the previous revision, which was enriched by increasing the curriculum content, the quality of learning will be further improved through activities such as finding (mathematical) problems in everyday life and observing and experimenting with a scientific outlook.
  - Improving provision in statistics (maths) and content on natural disasters (science) to enable students to collect and analyse necessary data and solve problems.
3. Enriching education about tradition and culture
  - Enhancing content on Japanese language and culture, including the classics (Japanese), understanding of major cultural assets and annual events in the prefecture (social studies), Japanese and local music, Japanese musical instruments (music), and Japanese food and clothing (home economics).
4. Enhancing moral education
  - To enhance moral education to enable students to understand moral values in relation to their own lives, to think deeply and to discuss them from multiple

angles and multiple perspectives, making full use of moral education as a ‘special subject’.

#### 5. Enrichment of Experiential Activities

- Enrichment of experiential activities to realise the fragility of life, the importance of rising to challenges and cooperation with others, and emphasis on (group) overnight field trips in nature and work experience (special activities).

#### 6. Enrichment of foreign language education

- The addition of learning time for ‘foreign language activities’, and the expansion of English (or foreign languages) as a subject to increasingly lower grades.
- The integration of learning through elementary, junior, and senior high school to improve foreign language skills; the development of new materials; the systematisation of the recruitment and training of foreign language expert teachers; and utilising community human resources.

#### 7. Infusing programming education into the curriculum

- Emphasises the development of developing ‘programmatically thinking’ which is the ability to think logically in order to achieve one’s objectives.
- Infused through all subjects, programming is not a subject and does not require dedicated class time.

Chapters 6–10 explain in detail how the new course of study is likely to change the teaching of English (Chap. 6), moral education (Chap. 7), science (Chap. 8), Japanese (Chap. 9), and traditional culture (Chap. 10) in primary and secondary schools, with varying foci on history, policy and pedagogy.

## 1.4 New Pedagogy, New Assessment

Rather than specifying knowledge only, the requirements of the new COS are organised around three questions: ‘what to learn about, in what way to learn, what can be done now?’. It aims to amend not only content, but also pedagogy and assessment. Pedagogy is largely addressed in debate under the rubric of active learning, which is expressed as ‘proactive, interactive, and deep learning’ in the final version of the COS. MEXT defines active learning that aims to develop general abilities, including cognitive, logical, and social skills, culture, knowledge, and experience’ through students’ voluntary and active learning. Therefore, the COS places particular emphasis on ‘active learning’, which enables students to learn independently and in depth. In the traditional classroom, the teacher gives a one-way lecture to the students. In contrast to this one-way lecture format, active learning is a general term

for teaching and learning methods that encourage the active participation of learners. Closely connected with the updated vision of pedagogy, assessment is envisaged as a pedagogic activity that supports the growth of each child and supports teachers to evaluate and improve syllabus and lesson planning. These underpinning concepts of pedagogy and assessment that run through the new course of study are discussed in Chaps. 4 and 5, respectively, providing a foundation for the following discussions of changes to the course of study in various subjects.

The call for active learning has generated the most discussion on the new course of study. Whilst the majority of commentators and researchers alike are enthusiastic about active learning, there is also cause for caution. The balance of enthusiasm and caution is a theme running through this book with no straightforward conclusion. The reasons for critique are rarely straightforward, involving discussions of social, political, economic, and technological factors.

## **1.5 The New Course of Study in Practice and in Wider Debates**

This book is a study of Japan's course of study for the 2020s, examining the recent revision of the course of study for implementation from 2020 onward. However, this inevitably has implications for a range of wider educational debates. On the level of practice in local schools, active learning and assessment for growth require teachers to reconsider previous practices and concepts of learning and teaching. This is a challenge. Educators are simultaneously involved in professional and civic research associations undertaking pedagogic research at local sites. Separately, the legal and political positions of all actors are undergoing realignment, empowering and disempowering certain actions by certain actors. Indeed, the central government 'above' the Ministry of Education and local governments 'below' it are far more involved in this course of study revision than they have been in previous cycles. MEXT has become more porous since the thawing of relations with the Japan Teachers' Union in the 1990s. The active learning aspirations of the new COS are restrained by social factors, and the assessment aspirations of the COS partly conflict with the wider assessment context which includes political pressure to perform better in relation to international standardised tests, such as PISA. And the entire education system operates mutually in a society with increasing child poverty alongside great stratification in financial and learning resources (Chap. 11). Finally, the very concept of the new knowledge society on which the recent revisions to the course of study are predicated were developed by the OECD as 'global education policy', which creates new tensions and complications in their interpretation and adoption. These broader contexts will shape the implementation and outcomes of the new curriculum, introducing unintended consequences alongside the intended ones. Thus, the chapters in

this book connect policy aspirations for pedagogy and assessment in the wider political context and within changes in the policymaking process—considering politics, policy, and pedagogy.

A book of this size cannot hope to cover all dimensions, issues, and perspectives. The selection of content therefore aims for breadth and variety, taking a series of deep studies over a range of topics. The chapters discuss wider political shifts and the policy context, policy aspirations for active learning in the classroom and case studies on the ground, debates from both core academic and non-academic subjects, and focus on elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels. The chapters also range in their viewpoint and position.

## 1.6 The Chapters in This Volume

In Chap. 2, Kasai considers broad changes in the educational policymaking process in Japan, whilst providing an overview of the main actors involved in high-level policy formulation. This analysis elucidates the characteristics of the traditional policymaking process under the so-called ‘1955 System’ to the newly fermented ‘prime ministerial leadership’ (*Kantei-shudō*). The features of contemporary education policy are set within this framework, before finally commenting on the top-down nature of Japanese education reform from the Meiji Restoration until today.

In Chap. 3, Sasaki overviews changes to the course of study over the past three decades. The chapter discusses the institutional framework in which the course of study operates and its legal and administrative status in relation to long-standing debates on its effect on schools and teachers. The contents of subsequent revisions over the past three decades are discussed, focusing on how ability and personality are conceptualised and envisioned in the discourse of each revision. These discussions provide a historical perspective against which to consider the latest (2017) revision.

In Chap. 4, Ichikawa introduces the history and development of active learning, examples in practice, and critique that arises from teachers on the ground. The umbrella term ‘active learning’ was formally introduced into the course of study for compulsory education in 2017. However, the concept has a long and complex history; and includes many ideas which are far from new in Japanese schools. This chapter traces the history of active learning from its unlikely origins in US higher education into compulsory education in Japan; overviews official policy on active learning as it was adopted and Japanised by the Ministry of Education; and discusses some challenges and examples of practice. Whilst active learning encourages innovation and creative collaboration between teachers and students, its demands on teacher time and the extent of cognitive adaptation required of teachers against the specific social and structural norms of the Japanese education system present significant challenges to the widespread adoption of active learning.

In Chap. 5, Iida describes the requirements of the Ministry of Education and what they have defined as the primary challenges Japanese schools must address in developing, implementing, and sustaining a comprehensive approach to assessing



and evaluating learning outcomes under the new course of study, and iterates some of the means by which MEXT envisages that schools might respond to these requirements. Whilst evaluation and assessment ensure accountability, the primary focus of assessment and evaluation, as written in the course of study, is on ensuring all actions improve student outcomes. The chapter is valuable to thoroughly understand the perspective of the Ministry of Education.

In Chap. 6, Aspinall discusses controversies surrounding revisions to the course of study for English (foreign language) from the late-1980s until today. The English language curriculum has been subjected to sustained criticism over both its relevance and effectiveness. Reforms throughout the period 1989–2020 were aimed at solving this problem. These reforms included introducing native-speaker Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), introducing English language as a subject in elementary schools, and revising the university entrance exam system. Each of these reform efforts met with serious practical difficulties at the implementation stage as well as push-back from important stakeholders. However, efforts to add tests of spoken English have failed to bear fruit. Efforts to introduce English to elementary schools have been hampered by a lack of qualified teachers. Many students continue to see English as a very difficult subject with little relevance to their daily lives.

In Chap. 7, Bamkin discusses policy change in moral education, focusing not only on changes and their translation into practice, but also considering the implications for understanding the policymaking process. This significant reform was driven not by the Ministry of Education, as most curriculum matters have been, but by a policy council under the leadership of the prime minister. The reform changed the content of the course of study, but also exposed new tensions in the policymaking process and thus provides new insight into the role of the Ministry of Education. This chapter examines how policy unfolds both before and after its written form is promulgated. It considers how policy changes as it is interpreted by teachers, school administrators, members of the boards of education, and textbook publishers working through the Ministry to mediate policy. Rather than closing the discussion on how moral education is enacted in schools, this chapter aims to illustrate some of the complexities of policymaking, to question the perceived internal coherence and omnipotence of the Ministry of Education, and to encourage studies that look beyond written policy and towards the interaction between policy and practice.

In Chap. 8, Onuki discusses the 2017 revisions to the science course of study against historical and contemporary debates in Japan. Historically two points have attracted debate: (1) determining the objectives of the science courses, and how the educational content should be selected, prioritised, and ordered—the scope and sequence of curriculum; and (2) determining for whom the educational content is appropriate—the question of its relation to indigenous knowledge. Analysing from the former point of view will help to clarify the quality of excellence that has been pursued in science education in Japan. The latter will help to evaluate whether excellence is equally guaranteed to all children from a curriculum perspective. The background of these debates is discussed before examining the course of study in relation to these historic and domestic debates, alongside newer global debates of key competencies. The discussion is illustrated using examples from the new course of study to

keep the discussion grounded in school practice. The progressive agenda for Japan's science course of study is evaluated on its capacity to simultaneously ensure excellence and equality. This will provide suggestions that will facilitate science education reform for a knowledge-based society.

In Chap. 9, Ohagi discusses the development of Japanese-language education in Japan over the preceding decades and under the second Abe administration (2012–2020), paying special attention to the 2017 revision of the junior high course of study for Japanese-language education. The primary source materials used include the relevant courses of study as well as a selection of MEXT-approved junior high textbooks. The chapter identifies three major flows that coalesced in the changes that can be observed in the revised course of study as well as in school textbooks published in the last few years. Firstly, whilst the revision in many ways was intended as a reversal of the earlier *yutori* (relaxed) style approaches, many of these aspects remain intact. Secondly, the so-called PISA shock motivated MEXT to stress the need for technical mastery of language and the pursuit of better functional reading literacy according to the PISA model. Thirdly, the reform drive of the second Abe administration motivated a greater emphasis on traditional language culture and classic literary works. Although the Japanese-language textbooks in use now may not have been approved based on criteria from the newest course of study revision, it is evident that they pre-empt and reflect similar policy intentions. The chapter concludes with some comments on both the value and the limitations of studies of the course of study and of textbook materials.

In Chap. 10, Chiba examines current issues surrounding traditional arts education in Japanese compulsory education. The historical background of traditional arts education is discussed to elucidate its interaction with issues of nationalism, gender, and social class. Rather than being offered as a regular subject in Japan, traditional arts tend to be taught in class time dedicated to non-subjects, particularly integrated studies (*sōgō gakushū*), moral education class (*dōtoku*), and special activities (*tokubetsu katsudō*); and as curricular club activities (*kurabu katsudō*) or extracurricular club activities (*bukatsudō*). The chapter further analyses two case studies to consider regional variation. The chapter draws on interviews with teachers and administrators of traditional arts education in public schools. These case studies are then discussed in relation to issues of gender and class, before summarising the potential for traditional arts education in Japanese compulsory education and its future challenges.

Chapter 11 considers the extent to which the adoption of active learning might exacerbate disparities in educational achievement along class lines. The Ministry of Education constructed the new course of study for an education system fit to prepare children for the new knowledge society, but also making explicit reference to the need for the new curriculum to better provide 'equal opportunities' of education. The new course of study resulted in reinvigorated core subjects, active learning, and key competencies for the twenty-first century. Whilst many scholars welcomed the ideals underpinning active learning, the revision has raised questions over whether it is conceivable to require all students, without support from outside the school, to gain proficiency with both the knowledge required by the course of study and the competencies for applying knowledge that are now required. Analyses of the new

course of study must account for the increased weight of active learning. This chapter undertakes such an examination, from a sociological perspective, to question whether the new curriculum is likely to achieve the aim of equal opportunities of education. This is discussed in the context of specific changes promoted under the banner of active learning and the Ministry's slow recognition of disparities along class lines. Ultimately, for the new course of study to live up to expectations, it needs to provide a quality education to all children equally by mitigating social stratification along class lines.

In lieu of a conclusion, Bamkin's closing Chapter 12 expands some of the remaining questions surrounding the new course of study and their implications. Covered in particular is the fact that, despite enthusiasm for the new course of study and its potential to respond to a certain conception of the new knowledge society, uncertainty and the need for caution arise from the wider policy landscape and context of education. Evidence suggests that the new course of study was drafted in reference to well-established pedagogic principles and genuine aims for a child-centred education, building on numerous countless previous steps taken by the Ministry of Education in this direction. This trajectory of change is adjusted based on the global consensus of a shift towards a 'new knowledge society'. In doing so, MEXT tends towards a humanistic position on the new knowledge society. Simultaneously however, the curriculum operates in a broader policy context which has incorporated decentralisation and performativity mechanisms related to examination results, along with their potential to 'activate competition' between prefectures and perhaps at lower levels, informed by an 'economised' conception of education. Nonetheless, study of the course of study remains important as a signal of the intent of the Ministry of Education, and as a set of guidelines for teachers, school administrators, and educators in local settings. Further research is needed 'on the ground' in schools to better understand how these policies are being translated into practice.

Together, we believe that the chapters in this book constitute the most detailed self-contained account in English of the new course of study in the context of reform. Some aspects of the course of study remain incomplete or are subject to ongoing debate. The implications of the new assessment for university exams and English language provisions are two such areas. Some aspects will become ripe for reconsideration alongside the next course of study, due in the years leading up to 2030. Given the measured debate and widespread acknowledgement of uncertainty, active learning may benefit from a dignified longer-term evaluation (whether the concept is indeed 'new' or not). Other aspects will shift in relation to political, social, economic, technological, and medical circumstances. Indeed, little over a month before the new course of study was due to come into effect, the world entered its greatest shared crisis since the Second World War—the first truly global pandemic of the Information Age. Such social and economic upheaval is bound to ferment new ideas on education reform, not least in relation to technology. It is therefore valuable to emphasise that the perspectives brought together in this volume result from studies undertaken before the onset of the pandemic, and thus offer merely the groundwork for future research.