

Building Bridges to the World of Work

Yukie Hori, vice senior researcher at the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JIL), explains Japan's initiatives and vision in respect of internships.

Until the 1980s, Japan was highly rated for the successful transition of its young people into the workforce. The fact that in Japan young people were able to make a smooth transition from senior high school into a situation of stable employment, without going on to university, has come to be appraised as the finest aspect of Japan's postwar education system.

However, the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s brought a change in this unique Japanese feature. In the late 1990s, the economic slump forced companies to drastically reduce their intake of new employees, and this as well as other factors led to increasing numbers of freeters and NEETs, mainly comprising young people who left school before completing their senior high school education.

This was the turning point for the start of career education. The focus of

such education is the internship, which means work experience while still at school.

The age of young people in Japan making the transition from education to employment spans a wide range of fifteen to thirty-four years, compared with the global range of sixteen to twenty-four years. The reason for this is that the time of transition from education to employment is late and extends over a long period, with approximately 97% of students going on to senior high school, and approximately 70% of students going on to university, junior college, or other vocational school. While this means that students possess higher levels of knowledge and skills, their more advanced age means that they are more likely to experience difficulties in making the transition. Therefore, it is all the more necessary to arrange internships when young people are still at school. Of

course, this alone is not the solution, but in the present situation it is an indispensable method to aid the transition into the workforce of young people in Japan.

Present Situation of Internships

Internships from junior high schools through the mediation of universities and other public institutions are currently expanding. As well as universities, employers' associations such as the Japan Business Federation and private-sector companies that wish to attract publicity are also promoting internships. In particular, approximately 90% of universities provide courses of study that include internship periods, though the percentage of students participating remains at an estimated 20% of the total. Student awareness of different types of job lags behind the system, so it is hoped to expand the opportunities for students to find out about the variety of jobs that exist.

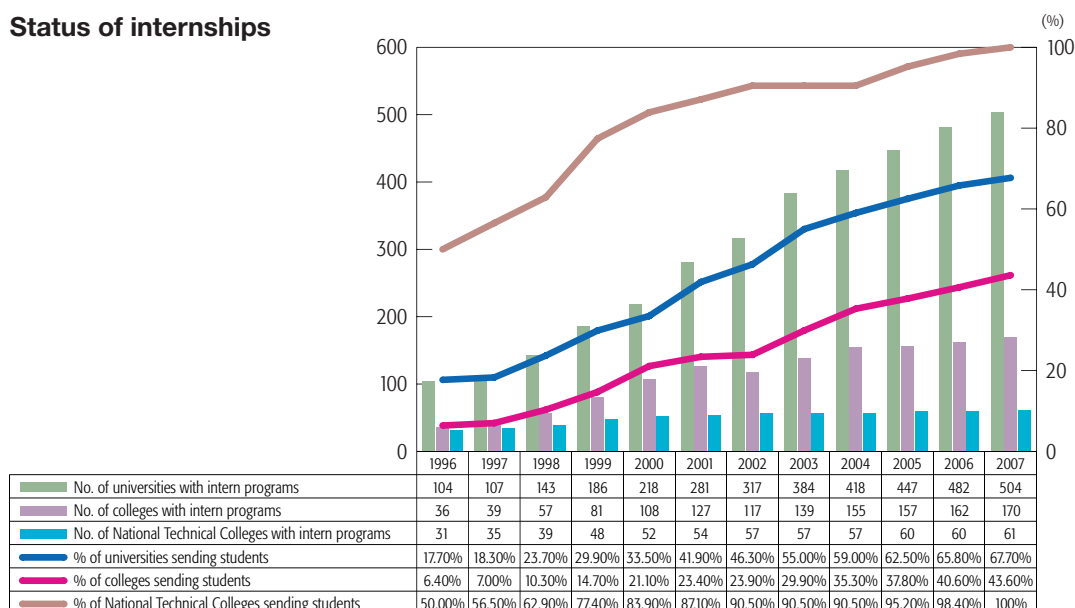
Various kinds of internship exist. For a university, for example, the work experience period is around ten days, while in other settings this may be as short as a single day, or extend to almost one year. The content, too, varies, from a quite specialized period of practical on-site training related to the engineering department of a university where internships have been arranged before, to just a brief glimpse into a company.

However, students who have participated in internships generally have a favorable impression, with 80% in one particular survey indicating that they were "quite satisfied."

Their participation aims can be classified into four types: "Want to get work experience," "Will be useful for finding a job," "Want to acquire some business experience," and "Want to get some specialist knowledge."

There are three types of work that stu-

Status of internships



Source: MEXT

dents can experience. One is the “task attainment model” that requires students to attain a task. For example, the student participants are gathered in a separate room from the employees, formed into teams, and assigned the task of creating a company homepage. This type accounts for around one third of the total. The second type is the “core business model” that teaches by showing the work actually performed. For example, participants may be allowed to accompany employees on business activities. The third type is the “casual/part-time model,” where the experience is that of actually working in the workplace. An example of this is the service sector, which has a high percentage of casual and part-time workers. This may lead to the provision of uncompensated labor and a low level of student satisfaction, which to an extent cannot be helped.

If the goals of students and the content of the experience are matched, naturally the level of satisfaction is enhanced. However, the level of satisfaction is nothing more than an impression after participating, and does not relate directly to the effectiveness of the internship, and at present no method of measuring the effectiveness has been established. Still more, many of those who participate in internships are students with a high level of awareness. This means, or rather the problem with this, is that internships have the function of connecting those students who do not have a high level of job awareness in a bottom-up approach.

Consequently, as stated previously, efforts are being made to expand the participation of students, and to create an awareness of jobs. Presently, in universities education before and after the internship is being emphasized, by for example increasing motivation prior to participation and providing opportunities following participation to present their experiences, encouraging students to share the ways in which they were inspired.

Challenges of Internships

The problematic aspects concerning the implementation of internships lie

in the difficulty of securing companies that will accept students. Universities are looking for companies that will accept students by making free use of the connections of the supervising teacher or the alumni network, but this does not necessarily mean that the company accepting the student suits the type of occupation the student desires. Meanwhile, the company has to make adjustments to its business in order to allocate a person in charge if it is to accept the student, for example, which leads directly to the problem of financial burden. Consequently, there is a strong sense of social contribution on the part of a company accepting a student. But aside from

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large corporations, the burden on medium and small-sized companies is large, and there is a tendency for them to be unenthusiastic.

However, there are also benefits for companies. Many companies had held off recruiting during the recession, and a hollow in the generational structure of permanent employees is occurring. In other words, originally there was the opportunity for employees in their late twenties to train new young employees and gain experience, but now they are advancing in age without being able to do that, and this is damaging organizations. Such companies are responding to internships as a good opportunity to fill this gap.


Further, some say that their workplaces are revitalized simply by young students coming in. If companies are able to experience for themselves benefits such as these, they will continue to accept students and perhaps even expand their intake.

The problem as far as the students are concerned is that they have a tendency to show no interest in occupa-

tional categories other than the ones they know. When it comes to students' hopes, these tend to focus not on what they themselves are suited or not suited to, but rather jobs that they know or occupational categories that are very popular. So, regarding the question of whether students who participate in internships in workplaces they do not aspire to are not satisfied, that is not necessarily the case. In some cases, they are inspired by the discovery of something new. Conversely, although they may have got the placement they wanted, they may experience disappointment owing to a gap between what they had imagined and the reality. In order to resolve

such issues, it is important to expand the number of companies that will accept students, and to increase the opportunities and alternatives for experiencing a variety of jobs.

Today's economic climate is worsening, and for this reason this is not an era when everyone can become a permanent employee, unlike the high-growth period. We cannot easily say whether internship is the best system to bridge the world of education with the world of work, which until now have had no ties, but there is no doubt that both in Japan and overseas it will continue to be a necessary system in the future.

In any case, it is necessary to expand the job awareness of young people. The experience of just one job has the possibility to achieve this. In that sense too, we must ensure that even in the present harsh economic climate, young people are able to make a smooth transition into society. 

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