

## **Education as the Main Factor of Social Mobility in Japan**

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### ***Abstract***

In the modern world, primarily in developed countries, education has become the main factor of intergenerational social mobility. Sociologists judge the degree of openness or rigidity of the social structure by whether the influence of “birth circumstances” on access to education increases or, conversely, softens. Although higher education has become widespread in Japan by now, this does not mean that the degree of social inequality in this area has decreased. Structuring children’s chances of access to higher education along the lines dividing society into different social strata begins here at the stage of schooling – first, in lower secondary school, and then in upper secondary school.

The inequality of chances that forms at the stage of school education affects the choice of university rank and directions of specialization by children and their parents, employment opportunities in the future, determining, in fact, the entire life path of a person. Based on the works of famous Japanese sociologists and the data of Japanese statistics, the author shows that the Japanese education system plays a dual role. On the one hand, it provides a chance to break away from one’s social roots and move up the social ladder to an increasing number of young people. On the other hand, it preserves and reproduces social inequality.

According to calculations by Japanese sociologists, indicators of relative social mobility, reflecting the ratio of chances to access higher education for people from different backgrounds, were remarkably stable throughout the post-war period. On the one hand, this does not confirm the widely accepted

thesis about the growing inequality in education in the last two or three decades. On the other hand, it allows us to assert that both before and now Japanese society is a *kakusa shakai*, or a gap society. However, the increase of the share of second-generation university degree holders in the structure of Japanese university graduates suggests that the scale of the influence of the factor of social inequality in education will gradually decrease.

**Keywords:** social structure, social inequality, education, intergenerational mobility, *kakusa shakai*.

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## **Introduction**

Under the influence of notable changes in Japan's economy and society in the last two decades, academics, experts, and the public have focused their attention on the character of Japanese society, i.e., how open its social structure is and how great the influence of social roots on an individual's life experience is; whether the degree of social inequality grows or, conversely, goes down in the course of socio-economic development, etc. As education is the major factor forming and transforming the social landscape today, especially in highly developed countries, discussions about the character of Japanese society mainly focus on the following questions: how fair the existing system of education is and whether it helps to mitigate social inequality. In addition, as full secondary (12 years) education

is received by nearly all young Japanese, the focus is chiefly on the system of higher education. This article considers some aspects of the above-mentioned problem.

## **Education and Social Mobility**

It should be mentioned first of all that specific features of Japan's demographic situation result in the continuous reduction of the number of graduates from upper secondary schools, i.e., potential students of Japan's universities. Their number went down from 1.778 million in 1990 to 1.329 million in 2000, 1.069 million in 2010 and 1.037 million in 2020. In the 2022 financial year (i.e., as of March 31, 2023), 990,200 Japanese graduated from upper secondary schools. Some 146,000 of them (14.7 percent) found jobs, 559,200 (59.4 percent) entered universities, and the remaining 166,000 (16.8 percent) entered *senmon gakko*, or vocational colleges, which have become especially popular as they provide training in occupations (mainly technical) that are in great demand in the labor market.<sup>1</sup>

Young people who have received full secondary education and decided to start their working life find jobs easily, as their numbers are falling rapidly. Thus, while 1990 saw 736,000 upper secondary school graduates entering the market (41.4 percent of their total number), in 2000, there were 239,000 (18 percent) of them, in 2010 – 169,000 (15.8 percent), and in 2022 – 146,000 (14 percent).<sup>2</sup> It is unsurprising, therefore, that the coefficient of effective demand for labor (showing the ratio between the number of vacancies and the number of individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Mombu kagaku tōkei yōran Reiwa 5 nen [Statistical Overview of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2023]. Table 10: [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059\\_00008.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059_00008.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Mombu kagaku tōkei yōran Reiwa 5 nen [Statistical Overview of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2023]. Table 10: [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059\\_00008.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059_00008.htm)

looking for a job) in this category is especially high: in 2015, it was 1.85, in 2018 – 2.53, in 2020 – 2.90, and in 2020 – 2.89.<sup>3</sup>

The share of upper secondary school graduates entering universities indicates an opposite trend. While, in 1990, it was 30.5 percent, in 2000 – 45.1 percent, in 2010 – 54.3 percent, in recent years, it has approached 60 percent. The number of students newly enrolled into universities in absolute terms grew from 540,000 in 1990 to 599,000 in 2000; then it stabilized at about 590,000 a year.<sup>4</sup>

The last three decades in Japan have witnessed a rapid expansion of a network of private universities: their number increased from 372 in 1990 to 620 in 2022, partly through the transformation of three-year *tanki daigaku* into full-fledged four-year universities. There also emerged new prefectural and municipal universities; their total number grew from 39 to 101. As a result, the total number of institutions of higher education in Japan had reached 807 by 2022, exceeding the figure of 1990 by 300.

Evidently, this significant expansion of the network of universities vastly exceeded real demand for their educational services, which resulted in raising accessibility of higher education by lowering admission requirements. It certainly does not refer to the leading national universities, where, as before, there is still fierce competition and a rigorous selection process in place. Yet, as a whole, the situation has definitely become more favorable for applicants. This can be seen, for example, in the ratio of applications to students admitted: in 1990, it was 1.93, in 2000 – 1.29, in 2010 – 1.16, in 2020 – 1.12, and in 2022 – 1.02. It seems that such a typical consequence of the “examination hell” as *ronins* (failing applicants trying to enter again the following year)

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<sup>3</sup> Rōdō tōkei yōran Reiwa 4 nen [Statistical Overview of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2022]. Table C-15: [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/youran/indexyr\\_c\\_2.html](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/youran/indexyr_c_2.html) 2022 c-15.

<sup>4</sup> Mombu kagaku tōkei yōran Reiwa 5 nen [Statistical Overview of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2023]. Table 10: [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059\\_00008.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059_00008.htm)

becomes a thing of the past. The number of *ronins* fell from 278,000 in 1990 to 145,000 in 2000, 84,000 in 2010, and 69,000 in 2020; in 2022, their number was only 766.<sup>5</sup>

Objective conditions for the rapid expansion of higher education in Japan create a demand for a more skilled and educated labor force from Japan's high-tech economy. This is particularly evident in the differences in starting wages of graduates with different levels of education (Table 1).

*Table 1. Starting Wages of Graduates  
(thousand yen a month, 2022)*

Levels of Education							
Upper secondary school		Technological college, <i>tanki daigaku</i>		University		Postgraduate course	
men	women	men	women	men	women	men	women
183.4	177.6	204.1	201.8	229.7	227.2	271.9	256.9

*Source:* Nihon tōkei nenkan 2024 [Japan Statistical Yearbook]. Table 19–11. <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/73nenkan/1431-19.html>

This is how the market evaluates graduates with different levels of education; these differences also serve as an incentive to receive higher education. In addition, chances of being hired as a permanent employee are higher for individuals with higher education, which, in Japanese conditions, where there is a considerable gap between full- and part-timers in labor remuneration, amount of benefits, and possibilities for career growth, is of special importance. Thus, for example, in 2018, permanent employment was found by 11.7 percent

<sup>5</sup> Mombu kagaku tōkei yōran Reiwa 5 nen [Statistical Overview of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2023]. Table 11: [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059\\_00008.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059_00008.htm)

of those graduating from lower secondary schools (9 years of education), 61.9 percent of graduates from upper secondary schools, 74.7 percent of graduates from technological colleges and *tanki daigaku*, and 79.1 percent of university graduates.<sup>6</sup>

However, perhaps the most important factor of rapid expansion of higher education is the perception that good education is a major condition for achieving success and moving up the social ladder, which emerged in the postwar period and became rooted in the public mind. Experts characterize Japanese society as *gakureki shakai*, which can be translated as “society focused on receiving degree certificates.” And this characteristic is fully justified.

Surveys prove that a significant portion of Japanese schoolchildren’s parents would like to give their children the highest possible education, although there are still evident differences between opinions held by members of different social groups. For example, 87 percent of families where both parents have higher education set this goal, the number is 74 percent for families with one parent having higher education, and only 50 percent for families with both parents having no higher education. These differences impact the motivation of the students themselves. Thus, by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year in lower secondary school (i.e., just before the entrance into upper secondary school), three fourths of students whose both parents have higher education intend to go to university in the future, 55 percent of those with one parent having higher education, and only one third of students from families where none of the parents has higher education [Genjō de tsutaeru kyōiku shakaigaku 2021, p. 49].

As Professor Matsuoka notes, Japan’s system of education is more just and equitable than that in many other countries. Introducing the system of universal compulsory 9-year education based on government funding enables children from the most remote areas of the country to receive

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<sup>6</sup> Yakunen koyō jittai-ni tsuite Heisei 30 nen [About the Situation With the Employment of Young People 2018]. [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/dl/4-21c-jyakunenkouyou-h30\\_08.pdf](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/dl/4-21c-jyakunenkouyou-h30_08.pdf)

education of the scope and level defined by government standards. These standards also cover the level of qualification of teachers, requirements for whom are equal in all schools [Genjō de tsutaeru kyōiku shakaigaku 2021, p. 50–51].

However, equal chances for receiving standard secondary education do not imply any equality in the access to educational institutions of a higher level, especially to university education. It is noteworthy that unequal chances for receiving higher education are noted by the Japanese belonging to different social groups, although the support for this statement generally goes down as the respondents' educational level increases. Thus, 73.9 percent of families where both parents have lower or upper secondary education agree that chances for receiving higher education are unequal; among families where both one parent having *tanki daigaku* or *senmon gakko* diplomas, this opinion is shared by 64.3 percent; if one of the parents has higher education, the above statement is supported by 69 percent; and when both parents have higher education – by 66.1 percent [Kyōiku to shakai kaisō 2018, p. 127].

The entire postwar history of Japan shows that opportunities for receiving higher education depend on the combination of a whole number of factors, the major ones being the family's economic position, social status of the family head (the father's profession), and the parents' level of education. That is not to say, however, that these factors directly influence opportunities of children from different social strata to receive higher education because the meritocratic character of Japan's school education system, i.e., its focus mainly on the appraisal of students' personal achievements, also gives opportunities to enter universities to children from the lower levels of the social structure. The plain evidence is the above-mentioned data showing a rapid increase of upper secondary school graduates going to universities.

Nevertheless, the data in Table 2 testify to a very high correlation between the socio-economic position of families and chances of children to receive higher education.

*Table 2.* Proportion of Children Entering Universities Depending on Their Family's Socio-Economic Position (percent)\*

Family income (million yen a year)	Parents' education level			
	Both parents with higher education	One of the parents with higher education	One of the parents with secondary technical education or <i>tanki daigaku</i>	Both parents with either lower secondary or upper secondary education
Up to 3.75	-	43.2	29.4	24.7
From 4 to 6.75	-	66.7	37.3	18.9
From 7 to 9.25	75.0	73.7	44.2	34.0
Over 11.25	86.4	71.7	44.0	43.5

Source: [Kyoiku to shakai kaisō, 2018 p. 118].

\*Calculations have been made by Professor K. Hirasawa based on SSM 2015 data. The most typical families by income level have been chosen. The family social status in this case is associated with parents' level of education.

As the data from the table show, given all the differences in the accessibility of education for children from different social strata, even families at the bottom of the social structure strive to send their children to universities whenever possible. Therefore, the composition of the Japanese student body is gradually changing and becoming more and more democratic, although this process cannot be called quite linear.

Using the data of the Social Stratification and Social Mobility Survey (SSM), a large-scale social investigation conducted in Japan once in ten years since 1955, Professor T. Kikkawa of the Osaka University analyzed changes in the structure of education received by the Japanese born in the periods of 1935–1944, 1945–1954, 1955–1964, 1965–1974, 1975–1984, and 1985–1994, identifying the following four groups: second generation of university graduates; first generation of university graduates; those

who received education below the level of their fathers (having higher education), and those without higher education.

*Table 3. Changes in the Japanese Population by Level of Education  
(by age cohorts, percent)*

	Age cohorts by year of birth					
	1985– 1994	1975– 1984	1965– 1974	1955– 1964	1945– 1954	1935– 1944
<b>Second generation of university graduates</b>	28.6	21.6	12.6	10.5	6.2	4.2
<b>First generation of university graduates</b>	22.5	24.4	27.5	28.0	17.6	11.1
<b>Those with education below that of their fathers (having higher education)</b>	9.0	8.7	4.4	4.2	3.7	5.2
<b>Those without higher education</b>	39.9	45.3	55.4	57.3	72.5	79.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Source: [Social Stratification in an Aging Society with low Fertility 2022, p. 124].*

Table 3 provides results of calculations made by Professor T. Kikkawa. While the spread of higher education resulted in the increased number of people with higher education among Japanese family heads, the

proportion of second-generation university diploma holders in the total number of university graduates also grew [Social Stratification in an Aging Society with low Fertility 2022, p. 124]:

Share of Second-Generation University Graduates  
in the Total Number (by year of birth, percent)

1935–1944	1945–1954	1955–1964	1965–1974	1975–1984	1985–1994
27.5	26.1	31.3	41.9	47.0	56.0

At the same time, the increasing proportion of first-generation university graduates, i.e., those from lower social strata, means that, in the postwar period, millions of young Japanese were able to break away from their class roots thanks to higher education and rise higher than their fathers in the social structure. This process reflects the scale of absolute mobility in terms of education, which was especially active among the generations born in the period of 1955–1974, i.e., in the period of rapid economic growth, when the country was going through sweeping industrialization and urbanization, with incomes of people (i.e., their fathers) skyrocketing. These generations' growing up also coincided with a very favorable period from the economic viewpoint.

Along with absolute mobility, experts also use the term “relative mobility” to analyze shifts in the social organization. In regard to education, it measures the degree of differences in opportunities for receiving higher education between children from different social groups, showing the degree to which these opportunities are impacted by their social roots. As Professor H. Ishida of the University of Tokyo notes, education is, on the one hand, an instrument helping people from unprivileged strata move to a higher status, and, on the other, a function of reproducing class positions in future generations, since the advantages of privileged classes in terms of providing education for their children give the latter the opportunity to maintain their class positions [Shōshi kōrei shakai no kaisō kōzō 1 2021, p. 10].

Leading Japanese experts agree that, contrary to the recently widespread notions about growing inequality in education, the entire postwar period did not witness any significant strengthening or weakening of the influence of social roots on opportunities to receive education by people belonging to different social strata. According to Professor T. Kikkawa's calculations, the ratio of chances for receiving higher education of the second- and first-generation university graduates changed as follows (by cohorts of birth): 1935–1944 – 3.39; 1945–1954 – 4.15; 1955–1964 – 3.389; 1965–1974 – 3.876; 1975–1984 – 3.448; 1985–1994 – 4.391 [Social Stratification in an Aging Society with low Fertility 2022, p. 124]. Thus, T. Kikkawa concludes, the model of relative stability did not undergo any significant changes: opportunities for receiving higher education in Japan are still unequal and chances of the second generation of graduates in the youngest cohort are four times higher than those of the first generation.

The same opinion is shared by Professor H. Ishida: he points out that the spread of higher education in postwar Japan was not accompanied by any noticeable reduction in differences between classes in its accessibility and that the role of education as a mediator between inherited class positions and intergenerational mobility did not weaken over time but did not increase either [Shōshi kōrei shakai no kaisō kōzō 1. 2021, p. 30].

While supporting this view, Professor T. Nakamura from the University of Tokyo notes, nevertheless, that stabilization of the relative social mobility pattern does not mean that no changes are happening. In particular, comparing SSM data for 2005 and 2015, he concludes that correlation between the level of education (measured by the number of learning years) and social roots (father's income and profession) in the youngest generations weakened through all levels of education (except for the stratum of 20–29-year-old young people whose fathers occupy the highest positions in the hierarchy of professions) [Shōshi kōrei shakai no kaisō kōzō 1, 2021, p. 45, 48].

Thus, calculations and relevant conclusions made by Japanese scientists do not, at the very least, confirm the thesis that inequality in the access to higher education has grown in the last two to three

decades. At the same time, with all the changes that occurred in Japanese society during the postwar period, starting from democratization of the education system in the course of the postwar reforms and ending with a considerable expansion of the universities network and reduction in the number of young Japanese, chances for receiving higher education now, as before, are structured along horizontal lines dividing society into classes and strata. Japanese society in this regard has always been *kakusa shakai* or a “gap society.”

A family’s socioeconomic status influences not only their children’s ability to obtain higher education, but also the choice of university by students and their parents. In Japan, universities range widely by their level. There are elite state and private universities, the graduates of which enter central government agencies and major companies and banks. At the same time, there are universities the graduates of which cannot aspire to such employment; moreover, they receive salaries on par with those who graduated from *senmon gakko* or *tanki daigaku*. Moreover, as Professor K. Furuta notes, these differences do not disappear over time [Shōshi kōrei shakai no kaisō kōzō 2, 2021, p. 96].

One of the main purposes for providing higher education is to raise young people’s chances for successful and advantageous employment. Based on the analysis of SSM materials from 1965 to 2015, K. Furuta attempted to determine the extent to which university rank influences opportunities of career as managers (*kanrishoku*) and specialists (*senmonshoku*), which are considered the most prestigious career tracks. For this, he divided universities into two groups: most prestigious and famous (rank I) and all others (rank II). Men aged 25 to 64 years were the object of analysis. Women were excluded from the analysis as they often quit jobs because of marriage and childbirth; thus, it is more difficult to trace their career track.

The general conclusions reached by the Japanese scientist can be summarized as follows. The situation with employment of university graduates was different over the five decades considered, which was to a great extent influenced by the economic environment. Therefore, the structure of their employment and career growth differs greatly

across birth and age cohorts. As the framework of the article does not allow lingering on this issue, let us see what the situation was in two age groups, 25–34 and 35–44 years, and three birth cohorts, 1961–1970, 1971–1980, and 1981–1990. As to the generation of 25–34-year-old men, i.e., the age of early career growth, differences between graduates of the first and second-rank universities are quite significant. While 50–60 percent among the former were recruited as managers and specialists, among the latter, this figure was about one third. Both groups showed a tendency towards reducing opportunities for career growth as managers; as to specialists, this career track was much more accessible to first-rank university graduates. Thus, in the youngest cohort (years of birth 1981–1990), about a half of first-rank university graduates and below one fourth of second-rank university graduates filled vacancies of specialists.

As to men of 35–44 years, i.e., the age when career tracks are already well defined, the following tendencies may be observed in the last two cohorts (years of birth 1961–1970 and 1971–1980). First, differences between the two groups of graduates in respect to access to career as managers and specialists remain unchanged. While, in the cohort of those born in 1961–1970, these differences are insignificant (about 60 percent of graduates occupied these positions with nearly similar ratio between managers and specialists), the situation noticeably changes in the cohort of those born in 1971–1980. Career opportunities for the first group are expanding, including those in managerial positions, while they are reducing in the second group. While two thirds of graduates occupied these positions in the first group, this proportion in the second group was below 40 percent [The figures are approximate and were calculated by the author using the following scheme: Shōshi kōrei shakai no kaisō kōzō 2, 2021, p. 100]. It would also be necessary to bear in mind that the position of *buchō* (Department Manager) is to a greater extent accessible to graduates of first-rank universities than to those of second-rank ones. The peak of career growth for the latter, in the capacity of a manager, is the position of *kacho* (Section Manager).

Professor K. Furuta explains the worsening of the situation for second-rank university graduates by their oversupply due to the

expansion of the network of private universities in recent decades. For this reason, part of them has to occupy blue-collar positions, or enter *senmon gakko* to obtain professions demanded by the market.

The socio-economic position of a family exerts an influence on the choice not only of the university rank, but of the future profession as well. This is the conclusion made by Professor I. Mori in her research. She uses SSM materials for 2005 and 2015 in her analysis. Based on the socio-economic position of the family (defined by the size of income, father's profession, and level of parents' education), I. Mori identified eight groups differing in the criterion of "degree of easiness" to enter university (the object of analysis is men and women born after 1960). Further, she analyzed what probability exists in each of the groups to be employed as specialists and to what degree they differ from each other by area of specialization. Obviously, the highest degree of 'easy entrance' is typical of those from families occupying a prestigious position in the social structure; those having "difficulties with entrance" include mainly children from unprivileged strata, particularly, members of the first generation of university graduates.

I. Mori made the following conclusions. The probability of occupying the position of a specialist after getting a university diploma for men and women tends to increase as their families' economic status rises. Thus, in the first two groups (with the lowest social status) the share of men employed as specialists was 36 percent and 17 percent, and the share of women – 28 percent and 27 percent, whereas in groups 7 and 8 (with the highest social status) it made 41 percent and 46 percent, 31 percent and 35 percent, respectively [Shōshi kōrei shakai no kaisō kōzō 1, 2021, p. 141]. I. Mori explains these differences by the fact that representatives of these groups graduate from universities different in prestige and prominence.

As to areas of specialization, those whose entrance into university was easier due to their families' high socio-economic position are more likely to focus on acquiring "broad knowledge" and choose such professions as doctor, dentist, auditor, financier, or university teacher. Those for whom it was difficult to enter show a clear orientation

towards receiving professional knowledge and skills in the fields highly sought by real economy. Men choose technical or scientific-technical professions in such areas as general engineering, electric machine building, construction industry, land management, and information technologies. Most popular among women are such professions as school teacher, nursery teacher, as well as professions highly sought in the social welfare and healthcare fields [Shōshi kōrei shakai no kaisō kōzō 2, 2021, p. 143–144].

In other words, social roots influence both the distribution of young Japanese by universities of different rank and their career tracks as well as by sectors and spheres of economy they will be working in.

### **Mechanism of Reproducing Inequality in the System of Education**

As noted above, Japan has free compulsory 9-year education; yet it does not mean that families of Japanese schoolchildren do not bear any expenses at this stage of education, be it a private school (which goes without saying) or a state one. The data in Table 4 show the level of these expenses.

*Table 4. Family Expenses for Education of Students in Lower and Upper Secondary Schools (2021, thousand yen a year)*

<b>Expenses</b>	<b>Lower secondary school</b>		<b>Upper secondary school</b>	
	<b>state</b>	<b>private</b>	<b>state</b>	<b>private</b>
<b>School education</b>	132.3	1061.4	309.3	750.4
<b>Extracurricular education</b>	368.8	367.8	203.7	304.1

*Source:* Kodomo no gakushūhi chōsa 2021 [Survey of Expenditures on Children Education] [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221220-mxt\\_chousa01-000026656\\_1a.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221220-mxt_chousa01-000026656_1a.pdf)

As the data from the table show, parents' expenses on school education in private schools by far exceed expenses in state schools: they are eight times higher in lower secondary school and 2.5 times higher at the next stage. It is due to differences not only and not so much in the scope and quality of educational services as in general conditions of children's stay at school. However, as most children go to municipal schools, and only a very insignificant percentage – below 8 percent – to private ones,<sup>7</sup> the effect of these differences on the situation in the sphere of education is limited.

The main role in the reproduction of social inequality in the sphere of education at this stage is played by the system of additional, extracurricular education. It includes three forms: *juku*, tutoring, and correspondence courses, with the lion's share of educational services provided by *juku*.

*Juku* started from small private schools set up by directors and/or teachers of local educational institutions to conduct extra activities with some part of students. However, their network grew and branched, and now *juku* is a large industry comprising various types of organizations. Over 80 large companies are now dominating the market of *juku* services; some of these have more than a hundred branches and operate nationwide. Over half of students in the system of extra education attend these institutions. They apply similar standards of education, use their own guidance materials and guarantee provision of high-quality educational services. Along with large *juku*, there are hundreds of small and middle-sized firms as well as individual enterprises (owned by directors or leading teachers of local schools) functioning on the market [Enrich 2018, p. 60].

There is a belief that *juku* primarily deal in the preparation of students for entrance exams to educational institutions of the next level

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<sup>7</sup> Mombu kagaku tōkei yōran Reiwa 5 nen [Statistical Overview of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2023]. Table 1: [https://www.mext.go.jp/bmenn/toukei/002/002b/1417059\\_00008.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/bmenn/toukei/002/002b/1417059_00008.htm) Data for 2022. Below 1 percent of children go to private primary schools.

(first – to upper secondary schools, then – to universities). In reality, however, their functions are much wider. Starting from primary school, parents turn to *juku* services to help children make home assignments, master and deepen the knowledge obtained at school. According to a survey performed by the Ministry of Education, some 10–12 percent of primary school students and 17–20 percent of those from secondary schools go to *juku* to raise their grades, and another 40 percent – to make home assignments, revise and extend the school curriculum. The role of *juku* in preparation to entrance exams is strongly enhanced in the third year of lower secondary school, i.e., before entrance to upper secondary school. At this stage, about two thirds of students attending *juku* concentrate on the preparation for entrance exams [Enrich 2018, p. 58]. This preparation provides not only the deepening of academic knowledge but the mastering of the exam-passing technique as well. Moreover, the rehearsal of exams with the use of prior year examination tests helps children and their parents assess their chances for choosing this or that higher-level school.

Technically, *juku* is a framework within which education is accessible to students from very different social strata. It is possible due to a flexible system of class organization: children and their parents may choose the most suitable time for classes as well as the subjects to study and the size of the group (starting from individual activities and ending with classes of various size). Clearly, this cannot but be influenced by the families' socio-economic position because *juku* attendance is fee-based. Yet, partly for advertising purposes, partly due to the genuine desire to support capable children from low-income families, some large *juku* have recently begun to reduce fees for their education, and, in some cases, even to pay them a scholarship [Enrich 2018, p. 267]. Yet the scope of such practice is very limited.

As the data in Table 4 show, average expenses for *juku* borne by families of schoolchildren going to state schools are not at all lower than those of privileged families whose children go to private schools, because all those who want to provide to their children “a level of education as high as possible” use education in *juku* as a tool to increase

chances of entering the most famous upper secondary schools. The proof is, particularly, the significant rise of children going to private upper secondary schools, which are increasingly competing with state schools both in terms of the general level of education and such an important criterion as the share of graduates entering universities. While, in 2010, private schools accounted for 29.7 percent of upper secondary school students, in 2022, the figure was already 34.3 percent.<sup>8</sup>

The data of Table 5 allow one to judge how possibilities of using extracurricular activities depend on families' financial position.

*Table 5. Expenses on Extracurricular Activities Depending  
on the Family's Annual Income  
(Municipal lower Secondary Schools)*

<b>Family income, million yen annually</b>	<b>below 4</b>	<b>4–5.99</b>	<b>6–7.99</b>	<b>8–9.99</b>	<b>10–11.99</b>	<b>over 12</b>
<b>Expenses on extracurricular education, thousand yen annually</b>	215	253	283	273	398	502

*Source:* Kodomo no gakushūhi chōsa 2021 [Survey of Expenditures on Children Education] [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221220-mxt-chousa01-000026656\\_1a.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221220-mxt-chousa01-000026656_1a.pdf)

Differences of the same range are observed with respect to families' expenses on *juku* at the final stage of school education, i.e., in the period when children attend upper secondary school (Table 6).

<sup>8</sup> Mombu kagaku tōkei yōran Reiwa 5 nen [Statistical Overview of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2023]. Table 1: [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059\\_00008.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/1417059_00008.htm)

**Table 6. Expenses on Extracurricular Education Depending on the Family's Annual Income (municipal and private schools)**

<b>Family income, million yen a year</b>	<b>below 4</b>	<b>4–5.99</b>	<b>6–7.99</b>	<b>8–9.99</b>	<b>10–11.99</b>	<b>over 12</b>
<b>Expenses on extracurricular education, thousand yen a year, municipal schools</b>	99	124	156	211	246	361
<b>Expenses on extracurricular education, thousand yen a year, private schools</b>	147	150	163	226	297	494

Source: Kodomo no gakushūhi chōsa 2021 [Survey of Expenditures on Children Education] [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221220-mxt-chousa01-000026656\\_1a.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221220-mxt-chousa01-000026656_1a.pdf)

As we noted in one of the articles published earlier, “which upper secondary schools students enter has a special importance in Japan because of consistent patterns that developed over long decades: graduates of the most prestigious schools enter the most famous universities; from schools of a lower rank, they enter less famous universities; and most graduates of ordinary schools enter the labor market. That is to say, the life paths of young Japanese to a great extent depend on what upper secondary school they are able to enter” [Lebedeva 2020, p. 109].

As shown in Table 6, regardless of the school type and rank, parents turn to *juku* education to raise their children’s chances to enter universities; interestingly, the influence of the family’s financial position on the amount of expenses for these purposes becomes even

stronger at this stage. To our mind, it is explained by the fact that, by then, the parents and students themselves have already decided the destiny of the latter. Low-income families try to optimize their expenses on education and not to set unreachable goals. On the contrary, well-off families try to use all opportunities to ensure their children enter the most prestigious universities so that the children could inherit their high socio-economic position. Thus, different life tracks are shaped for children from different social strata at this stage. Some enter prestigious universities, others – less famous ones, and some choose *tanki daigaku* or *senmon gakko*, while a part of them enters the labor market.

Understandably, these are not only academic achievements of schoolchildren which affect the choice of university of this or that rank, but also the amount of tuition fees. Tuition fees are equal and quite sparing in all state, prefectural, and municipal universities (535 thousand yen a year in 2020), which results in fierce competition and rigorous selection at the leading state universities. As for private universities, the range of prices is extremely wide – they depend not only on the university's prestige, but also on the department chosen (especially expensive is education in medical departments, where the annual fee reaches 6.5 million yen a year). The effect of the tuition-based character of education on its accessibility is intensified by the fact that, unlike other Western countries, Japan has a very poorly developed system of grants for education and does not pay scholarships to students from low-income families. It is most likely due to a deeply rooted belief that paying for children's education is almost a sacred duty of their parents.

The family's financial position impacts not only the choice of the university rank; as shown in the first part of the article, it also influences the very decision whether the child enters university at all (Table 2). The magnitude of this factor even increases when taking a decision about education for the second child, which is proven by the data below (Table 7).

*Table 7. Proportions of Families Providing Education to One and Two Children  
(depending on their socio-economic status), percent\**

Annual income, million yen	Level of parents' education							
	Both parents with higher education		One of the parents with higher education		One of the parents with <i>tanki daigaku</i> or <i>senmon gakko</i> education		Both parents with lower or upper secondary education	
	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II
below 3.75	-	-	55.0	31.3	50.0	14.3	37.5	11.0
4–6.75	-	-	88.4	50.0	55.0	23.5	32.7	6.7
7–9.25	86.8	75.0	86.8	60.4	62.5	25.8	54.3	19.5
over 11.25	100.0	75.0	90.9	56.8	66.7	26.1	68.2	30.0

Compiled based on: [Kyōiku to shakai kaisō 2018, p. 119].

\*I – proportions of families providing higher education for one child; II – proportions of families where both children receive higher education.

Evidently, apart from the family's economic position and social status, the decision about higher education for the second child is influenced by other factors, for example, the child's gender. As a whole, the data from the Table indicate that the level of income plays a decisive role in taking this decision. A considerable portion of Japanese families face this problem sooner or later, because, despite the notable reduction of the average number of children in recent decades, many families still have two children or more. Thus, the 2021 data indicate that a half of families (50.8 percent) have two children, and one family in five has three or more.<sup>9</sup> Japanese sociologists believe that difficulties

<sup>9</sup> Dai jurokkai shussei dōkō kihon chōsa. Kekka no gaiyū [Sixteen Japanese National Fertility Survey. Summary of Results], p. 43. *National Institute*

experienced by Japanese families willing to provide their children with decent education are one of the major factors of the declining birthrates in the country.

## Conclusion

Thus, Japan's system of higher education, being a major factor of social mobility, plays a dual role. On the one hand, due to the rapid spread of higher education, with it turning, in recent years, into a mass phenomenon, the number of "migrants" breaking away from their social roots and rising to higher levels of the social structure (to the white-collar class) increases. That is to say, higher education acts as a powerful factor of absolute social mobility.

As for relative social mobility, i.e., the ratio of chances to receive higher education by children from different social strata, calculations of Japanese scientists show that no significant changes are underway in this respect. Like before, the access to higher education and chances for entering a famous university today greatly depends on the family's socio-economic position, primarily on its financial capability. Social differences begin structuring these chances early in lower secondary school, and then in upper secondary school, while the main tool of social inequality conservation at this stage is the system of extracurricular education (*juku*). The inequality of chances developed at the stage of school education impacts the choice of the university rank and the future profession, and afterwards – employment opportunities, predefining, in fact, an individual's entire life path. As a result, while providing opportunities for more and more young people to move up the social ladder, the Japanese education system at the same time preserves and reproduces social inequality, because their life path and the place they may occupy in the social hierarchy greatly depend on their social roots and the social stratum their family belongs to. However, the

increasing proportion of second-generation university diploma holders in the structure of Japanese university graduates suggests that the scale of influence of social inequality in education will gradually decrease.

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