Japanese education

How to tamper with success?

Tokyo

SIX months into its discussions, Japan's Education Reform Council, set up to plan sweeping changes in the education system, is riven with internal strife. First recommendations to government are due in May or June, but the prospects of a national consensus seem to be receding.

Japan shares with the United States the feeling that something has gone deeply wrong with the educational system. But rather than indiscipline and falling standards, Japan is worried about overzealousness and excessive competition. On the surface, the two nations' educational systems are similar, after all the 6-3-3-4 system (the number of years spent at primary, junior, high school, senior high school and university respectively) was put in place by a team of US experts who spent four weeks in Japan at the end of the war. But differences in the two societies have completely altered the actual educational process.

Entrance to state universities, which are the most admired, cheapest and most sought after, can be caricatured as follows. In early spring, national examinations, which precede the examinations set by individual universities, are held for the 330,000 applicants for the 97,000 state university places. Seven subjects are tested in a one-thousand-point multiple-choice examination; emphasis is on rapid recall from a huge store of facts.

Surprisingly, results of this test are never announced. Instead, the student hurries from the examination hall clutching a copy of his marksheet and delivers it to a private examination company, the biggest of which will collect marksheets from two-thirds of all candidates. The company performs a computerized analysis, and puts students' marks together with accumulated data on the rankings of individual universities and their faculties. The result is an assessment of one's individual position in the hierarchy and the probability of one's being able to reach the entrance examination standard of any particular university.

Then comes the difficult bit: deciding which university entrance examination to try. There is only one chance each year because all state universities hold their examinations on the same day. Marks in the national examination will be added to those gained in the university examination (in a proportion that varies from university to university) to give the final score which alone determines success or failure.

Thanks to the computerized analysis, many students simply aim at the best college they now know they have a good chance of entering. The disadvantages are obvious: considerations of what a young person would really like to study become lost as students choose courses simply to match their marksheet scores, those who enter a particular course tend to be of such

similar ability that lecturers find them dull to teach and the many who aim too high have to spend another year cramming for a second try.

Driving this hellish system is the recognition that the rank of university one enters will to a large extent determine one's success in life. Entrants to the most influential universities are virtually assured of entering good jobs in top companies or government and university life itself is almost a holiday.

The effect of the examination hell is felt right back down the system. Not only do students spend hours after school at *juku* (cramming schools) but they also log up the highest homework hours in the world. These are added to long school hours which ensure that a Japanese high-school graduate has spent four more "years" at school than his US equivalent. And the examination system for senior high-school entrance has come to mirror that for universities. Before a choice of senior high school is made — and there will often be ten such schools in any school district of a large city — mock entrance examinations are taken at private examination schools. Analysis of these results once again defines one's position in the hierarchy and what school one may hope to enter.

Of course, the 70 per cent of students who do not go on to university might seem immune from all this struggling. But that is not actually the case; as high schools are unstreamed and orient themselves to entrance examinations, less talented students tend to be ignored — so much so that the 6-3-3 school system is often cynically referred to as the 7-5-3 system, meaning that only 70 per cent of primary-school children, 50 per cent of junior high-school and 30 per cent of senior high-school children can keep up with the course.

Reform is not surprisingly a popular issue and one that Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone has made skilful use of. But so far the Education Reform Council Nakasone set up (see *Nature* 308, 677; 1984) seems bent on proving how difficult it is to achieve. The council is split into four committees: reform of education for the coming century, social education, elementary and junior high-school education and higher education. The first committee's brief is wide; it is this committee, calling for drastic change, that has clashed in recent weeks with the fourth committee, which is closer to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) and wants whatever is to be done to be done very slowly. Hottest debates have hinged on "liberalization", a word, it seems, with many meanings. At one level it implies what everyone agrees is needed, less emphasis on standardized scores and more on a student's individual needs. But for the first group, headed by Ministry of International Trade and Industry former vice-minister

Naohira Amaya, it also means "letting in the vitality of the private sector", massive widening of the regulations for setting up schools and colleges so that many more private schools can be set up, abolition of school catchment areas to allow "freer choice", making all high schools and universities into corporations so that the difference between state and private schools and universities vanishes, ending of centralized textbook selection by MESC and elimination of national examinations for entry into many professions.

Such strong opposition to these reforms has come from the fourth committee, along with a panel of former education ministers and the teachers' union (what those in favour of the reforms call "vested interests") that the word "liberalization" is to be dropped by the first committee; it is to be replaced by the less well-defined concept of "individualization" of education.

Three more concrete suggestions have, however, emerged to a better reception: that the university year should begin in September rather than April to facilitate exchange of students and staff with US and European colleges; establishment of one and only one common examination for all universities, public and private, with fewer subjects; and fusing junior and senior high schools to remove one stage of competition. The fear is, however, that these last two measures would simply change the form and timing of competition rather than reducing its ferocity.

The real problem is perhaps that in any society where academic achievement (or at least, university entrance) closely determines success later in life — and Japan is close to being an absolute meritocracy — there is certain to be relentless competition in school. But at the same time the clear knowledge that it is one's own measurable performance, and not one's social background or anything else, that determines one's fate has given Japan one of its greatest strengths: an absence of class consciousness. The clear understanding that everyone has a chance has done much to strengthen the unity of Japanese society. That feeling is further reinforced by an unwillingness to introduce school streaming, for that would mean rejecting some members of an established group.

Japan's education system, in producing high quality through competition, along with a sense of equality, may have done much to bring about Japan's economic miracle. It is hard to see any government greatly changing what has proved so successful, although the Education Council's report in a few months may contain some surprises.

If change comes, it may perhaps do so for other reasons: many companies are starting to feel that now Japan is an international economic power the products of the present education system are not quite what they want — a change in their recruiting procedures would have a very rapid effect.

Alun Anderson