

No end in sight to the debate over Japan's school year

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Kizugawa, Kyoto Pref. – Japan's system of starting its school year in April is presumably designed to keep it in line with its fiscal year, which also begins in the same month.

India and Pakistan are the only other countries in the world where the academic year starts in April. It begins in January in Singapore and three other countries, in March in South Korea, Argentina and three others, in May in Thailand, in June in the Philippines and Myanmar, and in October in Egypt and Cambodia. In all other nations, the academic year begins in September.

Japan has a long-held social perception that first-grade students start elementary school under the full blossoms of cherry trees in early April. Starting the school year in April has caused little or no inconvenience as far as elementary, junior high and senior high school are concerned. But it has been a source of various troubles and inconveniences in higher education. The following are some examples.

First, under the system of dividing the academic year into semesters that has been adopted by most Japanese universities, the following abnormal scheduling has become the norm: the first semester lasts from April to July, followed by a summer vacation during August and September. The second semester lasts from October to January, with February and March reserved for entrance examinations, graduation ceremonies and other campus events during the two-month spring vacation.

In order to cram all the curriculums into the first semester that starts in April, classes must continue through the end of July. It is utterly unreasonable to force students to attend classes in the midst of July's dreadful heat and humidity and have them take their summer vacation in September when the weather turns nice and cool.

Second, since most of the countries and regions with which Japan has scholastic interchanges have the academic year beginning in September, the gap poses problems for Japan to hold exchanges of students, researchers and teachers with them.

Third, it causes inconvenience for Japanese professors taking part in international academic gatherings that are scheduled to best suit the school year starting in September.

Meanwhile, with the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak, the closure of schools from elementary schools to universities, originally set through the end of the Golden Week holiday season, was extended to the end of May, causing a two-month delay in the start of new school year. At this point, it appears that the delay could be made up for and the number of classroom hours set forth by the School Education Law could be met by shortening the summer vacation and cancelling events like sports festivals and field trips.

But earlier concern that reopening of the schools might be extended even further due to the pandemic led to calls for moving the start of the school year to September as a solution to the delay in the studies of schoolchildren. Governors of some prefectures strongly pushed the government to consider the changes

in the school year, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe himself once called a school year starting in September a "strong option."

However, the momentum for the school year reform quickly evaporated as it became clear that schools would reopen in June and concern was voiced over the extra costs for the government and households associated with a transition to the academic year starting in September. Now the government rules out an immediate move to a new school year system and says the issue will be a topic for future consideration.

In 2012, Junichi Hamada, then president of the University of Tokyo, proposed moving the start of the academic year for universities to September — primarily as a means of internationalization of the Japan's university education. According to his proposal, elementary to high schools would keep the current school year system. Those graduating from high school in March would spend the half-year period until entering the university in September in any way they like — studying abroad, engaging in volunteer activities or doing part-time jobs to earn money.

Hamada's idea died a quiet death within months, however, as it failed to gain proactive support from the government, business circles or academia. During the ensuing eight years, little progress has been made in internationalizing Japanese university education. While the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University still remain among the top 100 institutions of higher education in the world, Tohoku University, Osaka University and the Tokyo Institute of Technology have dropped out of the world's top 200 institutions.

The idea of starting the academic year for universities in September appeared to have gone from the agenda of the education ministry, which seems always eager to reshape the university education system. Therefore, it was puzzling how the COVID-19 crisis quickly prompted the government to explore reform of the school year system — at one point even entertaining the idea of moving to the September start of the school year as early as in 2021.

What would the academic year schedule at universities look like if it was to begin in September? A university with the semester system, for example, would have its first semester from September to December, followed by a short winter vacation over the year end/new year period. The second semester would run from January to May, with commencement ceremonies taking place in the latter half of May. The period from mid-May to early September would be for a summer semester, a summer vacation or a summer school open to the public.

In such a scheme, university teachers would be required to conduct classes only for nine months during the first and second semesters, which means they would be paid only the nine months' salary. They would have to rely on the "summer salary" from a research budget funded by outside sources, serve as advisers to private-sector firms or research institutes, or teach at summer schools to earn the remaining three months' pay. The tuition that students pay would similarly be regarded as remuneration for what they learn during the nine months.

It would not be an easy task to adjust to the numerous changes in the university systems and practices that would be brought about shifting the start of the school year from April to September.

A university that has been operating on an annual budget basis would have to be managed on a nine-month basis from September to May. During the remaining three months, the university would be open to the public as an arena for the summer school, while its teachers would have to find new sources of

income for that period. Needless to say, the income disparity among the teachers would expand. How to adjust the tuition to this new system would present another problem.

The debate on the start of the school year poses a question as to whether Japan is prepared to accept changes in its familiar systems and practices as it pursues the path of internationalization.

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