Outlining the Dynamism of Global Education Policy Borrowing: The Case of Japan as a Return Adopter of Competency-Based Education (CBE)

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Since the 1990s, a “new era” of rapid industrial and societal change has led countries worldwide to reassess their school systems. This reflection was propelled by the OECD and the EU, both of which introduced Key Competencies (KC) frameworks (EC, 2007; OECD, 2005). Researchers and policymakers refer to this as “global flows,” with growing interest in its mechanisms of transfer and diffusion (Anderson-Levitt, 2017). Anderson-Levitt and Gardinier, for instance, found that over 60 countries have integrated CBE reforms into compulsory education[1]. Many “early adopters,” such as England, Sweden, and Belgium, began shifting focus back to subject knowledge after adopting CBE in the early 1990s (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021; Matsuo, 2015). This trend aligns with the “traveling reforms” framework by Steiner-Khamsi and other comparativists, suggesting that “global flows” may have reached a “burn-out phase” (Watts, 2004, p. 212). However, the OECD, a key proponent of CBE since the late 1990s, appears to counter this view with its recent efforts to update the widely accepted 2003 KC framework (Rychen, 2016).

In this sense, Japan should be recognized as a unique case within CBE “global flows.” Again, according to Anderson-Levitt and Gardinier, Japan was identified as the third adopter “outside Europe” that launched its CBE reform in 1996 but returned “to more focus on the traditional curriculum” in the early 2010s. However, in close collaboration with the OECD, the Japanese government has emerged as a significant player in the global discourse, contributing to the evolution of CBE reforms within Japan and influencing the global understanding of CBE in recent years. (UNESCO, 2017) Like other “early adopters,” Japan has also gone through a period of shifting its education system back to a more knowledge-focused one. Nevertheless, unlike them, this country seems not only to be triggered again to pursue the CBE reform that has once given up but also to get an essential role in the long-term “global flows” of CBE.

On the other hand, this study is also expected to be of significant value to the Japanese educational community and researchers interested in Japan’s education system. In particular, studies on CBE reform, both domestic and international, have revealed a diverse range of findings—sometimes even contradictory—regarding the analysis of school education reform in Japan since the 21st century.

Generally, the explicit adoption of the CBE at the policy level in Japan can be traced back to the *1996 Report* (see Table 2) by the Central Council for Education (CCE), which proposed the concept of *Ikiru Chikara* (zest for living, hereafter ZFL) as a vision for Japanese education in the 21st century. (MEXT,1996) On the other hand, since 2011, the Japanese government has been working towards a “re-

[1] Including upper secondary education, which remains non-compulsory in many countries, would likely result in even more cases.

balancing" of the education curriculum, and the reform is said to have shifted towards a "back to tradition" while partially maintaining the principles of CBE. (OECD,2012) Because the so-called *Yutori* (relaxation) Education reform was closely linked to ZFL, the difficulties faced by the former have inevitably been perceived as challenges to the CBE reform in Japan as a whole. However, while the term *Yutori* has been removed from policy documents (even stigmatized), ZFL has long been inherited and celebrated as a principle in basic education. In short, the inheritance of ZFL can reflect the consistency of CBE reform in this country. Nevertheless, when we observe it through a lens of terminology and conception, it becomes evident that many frameworks, concepts, and discourses in Japan can be regarded as KC, such as *Shishitsu Nōryoku* (qualities and abilities, hereafter Q&A), *21seiki-gata sukiru* (21st-century skills, hereafter 21S) and *Tashika na Gakuryoku* (solid academic abilities, hereafter SAA), in addition to ZFL (for original Japanese terminology, see Acronyms at the end of this article). The questions here are, first, the causes behind the existence of the two-fold story of CBE in Japan and, second, the theoretical consistency of the various concepts and terms related to CBE in the country.

Thus, Japan's CBE reform offers an insightful investigation target, not only due to the limited case studies outside Europe and Africa but also because analyzing this "return adopter" may reveal new insights into the "global flows" of CBE—particularly in light of the OECD's "humanitarian turn," (Auld et al., 2019; Li & Auld, 2020) which could reshape perspectives on educational global governance. This article aims to perform a diachronic analysis of CBE reform in Japan, exploring the process and characteristics of its adoption from both global and local perspectives.

1 Research Methodology

1.1 analytical Framework: "Reception" and "Translation" in Global Policy Borrowing

This article followed Steiner-Khamsi's analytical framework of global policy borrowing to picture the whole story of CBE acceptance in Japan. She argued that "well-traveled reforms" exist throughout contemporary society. For example, as accountability systems in education were implemented in more and more countries and regions, their neoliberal characteristics, which were emblematic of the Thatcher-Reagan era, began to fade. Instead, these systems gained universality as an "international standard."

Building on this, she further emphasized two central concepts in analyzing global policy borrowing: "reception" and "translation." The former focuses on the attraction of external reforms to the borrowing country from various aspects, such as political, economic, and cultural factors. The latter concerns the processes and outcomes of how the introduced external reforms are adapted, adjusted, and restructured to fit the local context. (Steiner-Khamsi,2014)

As detailed in the latter part of this article, Western-centric international organizations (particularly the OECD) significantly influenced the understanding of CBE within Japanese society. In this sense, the historical development of CBE reforms in this country can, in a way, be seen as a process of educational borrowing from the "Global flows" of CBE, with the OECD as a central figure. From this viewpoint, the diversification of KC in Japan can be considered synonymous with the diversification of "translation" within the process of educational borrowing.

Consistency can be observed in the "translation" of KC within Japan, as shown in Table 1. However, several questions remain, as outlined below. Firstly, a clear isomorphic relationship exists between SAA

and “the three pillars of Q&A.” However, the element of “humanity” included in the latter evokes the “rich humanity” that is part of ZFL alongside the former, ironically suggesting a lack of consistency. Moreover, while 21S may appear similar to the three elements of SAA, the “Basic Competencies” in the former focus on the ability to apply knowledge, making it a fundamentally different concept compared with the latter, which includes understanding and acquisition of basic knowledge. Additionally, it is worth noting that there was an 11-year gap between the introduction of SAA and 21S. However, after promulgating the latter, CBE quickly returned a central concept in basic education reform.

Table 1 Overview of Concepts and Terms Related to Competency in Japanese

Terminology	Basic structure and contents
ZFL [a] (1996)	Solid Academic Abilities（SAA）; Rich Humanity; Healthy Body
SAA [b] (2002)	Basic Knowledge and Skills; Motivation to Learn; Thinking Ability, Judgment, Expression Ability, etc.
21S [c] (2013)	Basic Competencies; Thinking Competencies; Practical Competencies
The Three Elements of SAA [d] (2014)	Basic Knowledge and Skills; Abilities such as Thinking, Judgment, and Expression Required to Solve Problems Using These; Attitude of Actively Engaging in Learning
The Three Pillars of Q&A [e] (2016)	“Knowledge and Skills” that Are Alive and Functional; “Thinking, Judgment, and Expression Abilities” that Can Respond to Unpredictable Situations; “Learning Attitude and Humanity” to Apply Learning to Life and Society

Sources: [a] MEXT (1996); [b] MEXT (2002); [c] NIER (2013); [d] MEXT (2014a); [e] MEXT (2016).

To some extent, “reception” and “translation” represent the “cause” (why borrowing occurs) and “effect” (how the borrowing influences the current education system) of global policy borrowing. Therefore, this article aims to elucidate the background and mechanisms behind the Japanese government’s “reception” of the “global flows” of CBE and to explore how this is connected to the diversification of “translation” observed in CBE reform within contemporary Japanese society. By examining the interactions between the “global flows” and the local context, the article may potentially grasp and deepen understanding of Japan’s CBE reform as a long-term yet dynamic history.

1.2 Data collection and analysis method

Data collected based on the objectives of this article are as follows. Namely, all reports related to CBE issued by the CCE since 1996, research outcomes from the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) (such as research reports, papers, and books authored by institute members), relevant laws and regulations, as well as the three revised versions of the high school Courses of Study (hereafter CS) published in 1998, 2008, and 2018, were obtained online. Furthermore, meeting minutes and materials related to those reports have also been analyzed. These include, for example, the meeting minutes and final report of the “Study Group on Educational Goals, Content, and Assessment Based on the Q&A to be Cultivated” (hereafter “Study Group”), which was convened by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and included experts from related fields. Among these, the policy documents that this article primarily references are listed in Table 2 below.

This analysis follows the steps outlined below. First, the author closely examined descriptions related to CBE discourse in policy documents, investigating the period when each concept was proposed, which concepts were emphasized, and how other competency-related concepts were discussed. Next, primary sources cited as references in the policy documents (such as think tank reports, relevant recommendations from other government ministries, laws, and meeting minutes) are collected to consider the context and background of references to CBE. Finally, the interrelationships among various competency-based concepts

related to CBE reform in Japan (e.g., inheritance, competition, resistance) and the historical background that gave rise to these relationships were analyzed. Key reference documents are as follows.

Table 2 Key Reference Documents for This Article and Their Abbreviations

Title	Abbreviation in this article	Publishing Institution	Date of Issue
Vision for Japan's Education in the 21st Century (First Report) [a]	*1996 Report*	CCE	1996.7
2002 Appeal for Enhancing SAA: "Recommendation for Learning" [b]	*RL Report*	MEXT	2002.1
Improvement of the CS for Kindergartens, Elementary Schools, Junior High Schools, High Schools, and Special Needs Schools [c]	*2008 Report*	CCE	2008.1
Integrated Reform of High School Education, University Education, and University Entrance Examinations to Achieve High School-University Articulation Suitable for a New Era [d]	*HSUA Report*	CCE	2014.12
Improvement of the CS and Necessary Measures for Kindergartens, Elementary Schools, Junior High Schools, High Schools, and Special Needs Schools [e]	*2016 Report*	CCE	2016.12
Aiming to Build "Reiwa-Era Japanese-Style School Education": Realizing Individually Optimized Learning and Collaborative Learning to Unlock the Potential of All Children [f]	*2021 Report*	CCE	2021.1

Sources: [a] MEXT (1996); [b] MEXT (2002); [c] MEXT (2008); [d] MEXT (2014b); [e] MEXT (2016); [f] MEXT (2021).

2 Passive "Reception": The Rise and Fall of *Yutori* Education

2.1 The Local Orientation of ZFL within the *Yutori* Education Reform

On April 26, 1995, then Minister of Education Kaoru Yosano made an inquiry to the CCE titled "Vision for Japan's Education in the 21st Century," citing three main reasons for this inquiry. Namely: (1) recent societal changes such as globalization, informatization, the rapid development of science and technology, and the aging population with a declining birth rate; (2) deeply rooted social issues related to education in Japanese society, such as intense competition in entrance exams, bullying in schools, and absenteeism; and (3) urgent issues such as the implementation of the five-day school week and the decline in interest in science and technology among youth. In response to the inquiry, the 15th CCE committee and 16 external experts discussed it for 15 months, resulting in the *1996 report* with the same title. The report states, "As the future direction of education, it is fundamental to nurture ZFL in children within an environment of *Yutori*" (MEXT,1996), indicating the close relationship between *Yutori* education and ZFL. In this context, ZFL is a set of "abilities to identify issues independently, learn, think, make decisions, and take action proactively (…). It also includes the rich humanity to discipline oneself, cooperate with others, and possess a compassionate and empathetic heart. Needless to say, health and physical strength are essential for living robustly. We decided to refer to these abilities as ZFL for navigating the rapidly changing society of the future..." (MEXT,1996) Although the structure of ZFL was not explicitly defined in the *1996 Report*, Takada (2015) suggests that it can be interpreted as consisting of (1) problem-solving ability (knowledge, first underline part above), (2) rich humanity (virtue, second underline part above), and (3) health and physical strength (body, third underline above)(Takada,2015). Interestingly, the initially proposed concept of ZFL did not emphasize the acquisition and application of subject knowledge, the so-called "*Kiso Gakuryoku* (basic academic abilities)."

Chronologically, ZFL was officially proposed a year before the OECD launched the DeSeCo project, and the *1996 Report* also did not particularly address CBE. Additionally, the report suggests a shift towards valuing Japan's uniqueness rather than merely learning from foreign experiences, as indicated by the statement, "Our country, (…) can no longer rely on the method of effectively utilizing the scientific and technological developments of Western advanced nations. Instead, we must create our science and technology and pioneer new frontiers." (MEXT,1996) Against this backdrop, *Yutori* education and ZFL can

manifest the Japanese government's intent to develop an innovative educational system tailored to the country. In other words, from the viewpoint of educational borrowing, the proposal of ZFL should not be seen as a result of Japan's "reception" of the "global flows" of CBE but rather as something that emerged from a reflection on local educational issues.

Moreover, evidence supporting the above claims can be found in previous research. Rappleye conducted interview surveys with officials and staff of the MEXT, which revealed that high-level exchanges between MEXT and the OECD began to increase around 2005 when the CCE report "Creating Compulsory Education for a New Era" was issued. (Rappleye, 2012, pp. 202–203)

2.2 The Emergence of SAA within ZFL: Pressure from the International Environment

The *CS1998*, characterized by significant reductions in class hours and learning content, sparked concerns about a potential decline in academic abilities from the outset from various sectors of society. As Wu and Zhao noted, social criticism of *Yutori* education was relentless, mainly due to empirical studies conducted by experts, including economists and mathematicians, highlighting poor academic performance among Japanese students at the time. This was further compounded by the growing anxiety among parents, fueled by the media strategies of the cram school industry (Wu & Zhao,2018). To cope with such public opinion, in 2002, when the *CS1998* was to be fully implemented, then Minister of Education Atsuko Toyama issued the *RL Report* in which she reaffirmed to society the importance of basic academic abilities within the framework of *Yutori* education and introduced the concept of SAA. (MEXT,2002) Subsequently, in response to another inquiry from Toyama, the report on the Basic Act on Education and the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, issued in March 2003, further defined SAA as "basic knowledge and skills, motivation to learn, and abilities such as thinking, judgment, and expression." (MEXT,2003a). In October of the same year, another CCE report suggested: "SAA as an aspect of 'ZFL' from the perspective of knowledge." This positioned the latter as an aspect of the former (MEXT,2003b). Furthermore, as stated in the report, "The approach of nurturing SAA, Rich Humanity, and the health and physical strength (…), which together form ZFL, has been a consistent idea of this council" since 1996. (MEXT,2003b) This (especially the sentence underlined) indicates that the cognitive skills and problem-solving abilities emphasized in the *1996 Report* have now been replaced by a concept that foregrounds basic knowledge, as seen in SAA. Thus, the framework of ZFL, based on the holistic development of knowledge, virtue, and body (*Chi-Toku-Tai, 知徳体*), has been officially established. According to the above discussion, SAA was not initially introduced as a part of ZFL. Instead, MEXT needed to link the two to uphold the legitimacy of the *Yutori* education and regain public support.

The significant criticism faced by the *Yutori* reform, which aimed to address local educational issues, was closely related to external pressures outside the country. For example, the *RL Report* noted that the US, the UK, France, and Asia regard education as "the most important issue for the nation's future." The PISA 2000 results also highlighted concerns about Japanese students' learning motivation and study habits. (MEXT,2002) This suggests that the international environment, dominated by the principle of competition, has somewhat hindered the substantial advancement of *Yutori* reform. Subsequently, the overall decline in students' test scores and rankings in PISA 2003 and 2006 is said to have dealt a final blow to the already precarious reform. (Wu & Zhao,2018)

2.3 Legitimizing ZFL in the Post-*Yutori* Era: Referring to the KC framework as a strategy

As mentioned above, the two consecutive "PISA shocks" completely eroded public trust in the slogan of *Yutori* education, transforming it from a locally oriented reform agenda into an educational problem awaiting resolution. In October 2006, when Shinzo Abe was appointed Prime Minister for the first time, he established the Education Rebuilding Council, a policy advisory body directly under his authority. The main content of its first report was a review of *Yutori* education and some advice on fixing it (post-*Yutori*).

The revision in the *CS2008* reflects this shift since it intended to restore basic academic abilities based on subjects. The reduction in the number of class hours for "Integrated Study," the increase in the number of pages in textbooks, and the total class hours made the shift in direction unmistakably clear. However, the concept of ZFL, strongly associated with *Yutori* education, did not disappear with the latter's end but continued to hold a central position in upcoming CSs. One reason for this is that, by this time, ZFL had already incorporated SAA as one of its dimensions, allowing it to gain legitimacy within the post-*Yutori* context. However, using the OECD's KC framework as an external model to provide meaning and legitimacy to ZFL has also been essential for its "survival."

The influence of ZFL and the OECD's KC framework on Japanese education policy can be traced back to 2005, when the Curriculum Subcommittee under CCE discussed educational content and goals supporting ZFL, referencing the OECD's KC framework (MEXT, 2014a). However, ZFL was not clearly defined as CBE at the policy level until the *2008 Report*. This report highlighted ZFL's similarities with the OECD's KC framework, emphasizing developing skills for adapting to social life and applying abilities in real-life contexts (MEXT, 2008). Since then, the idea that "ZFL=CBE in Japan" has gained traction, with frequent references to OECD-originated CBE concepts. However, no records confirm specific elements from the "global flows" of CBE directly shaping ZFL, indicating that their commonality was, at that stage, ideological rather than structural.

As previously mentioned, the decline in Japanese students' performance on the PISA tests became the fatal reason for criticizing *Yutori* education. Such pressure from the international environment led the MEXT to partially abandon the established reform agenda outlined in the *1996 Report*. However, though the MEXT stopped using the word *Yutori*, it rejected a total shift and tried to protect the idea of ZFL. KC was originally a result of the DeSeCo project, which was initiated to provide the theoretical foundation that supports the validity and effectiveness of PISA test evaluations. In this sense, promoting ZFL as having "anticipated (*Sakidori, 先取り*)" the "global flows" of CBE can be seen as a legitimation strategy to preserve the educational reform policies carried forward since 1996 within the context of the "post-*Yutori*."

2.4 Revisions to the Basic Act on Education and the School Education Act

During the first Abe administration, led by the Prime Minister's Office and the Education Rebuilding Council, the Basic Act on Education was fully revised and enacted in December 2006, followed by partial revisions to the School Education Act in December 2007. Both laws redefined educational goals, with Table 3 showing how these goals reflect ZFL and SAA, respectively.

The introduction of *CS2008*, shortly after the legal revisions, was heavily influenced by those changes. Amid widespread criticism of *Yutori* education in Japanese society, the presence of SAA was reinforced in 2008. The *2008 Report*, also shaped by the legal revisions, identified SAA as (1) acquiring basic knowledge

and skills, (2) developing thinking, judgment, and expression abilities for problem-solving, and (3) fostering motivation to learn. Additionally, *CS2008* affirmed that these principles aligned with cultivating ZFL, as emphasized in the current CS. Thus, while MEXT aimed to underscore SAA in the CS revision, there was also a clear intent to preserve elements of *Yutori* education principles.

Table 3 Correspondence Between Laws Related to CBE Reforms and ZFL and SAA

Article 2, Chapter 1 of the Basic Act on Education (Aims of Education) 1. To develop a well-rounded education and acquire a wide range of **knowledge, cultivate an attitude of seeking truth**, **foster rich emotions and a sense of morality**, and **maintain a healthy body**.	ZFL ◆SAA ◆Rich Humanity ◆Healthy Body
Article 30-2, Chapter 4 of the School Education Act In the case of the preceding paragraph, special attention must be given to ensuring that students **acquire basic knowledge and skills** as a foundation for lifelong learning, **cultivate the thinking, judgment, expression, and other abilities** necessary to solve problems using these skills, and **develop an attitude of actively engaging in learning**.	SAA ◆knowledge and skills ◆Thinking, Judgment, Expression Abilities, etc. ◆Motivation to Learn

Source: https://laws.e-gov.go.jp/law/322AC0000000026 & https://laws.e-gov.go.jp/law/418AC0000000120, translated by the author.

3 Active "Reception": From "Learning from Outside" to Exporting Japanese Experience

3.1 Learning from Outside: The "Basic Research on Curriculum Development" Project

With the promulgation of *CS2008*, ZFL began to align with "international standards" in Japan. However, detailed references to CBE's "global flows" were sparse until the *CS2018* revision period, which changed significantly. NIER's "Basic Research on Curriculum Development" (BR) project played a key role in this shift, spanning five years and producing seven reports (see Table 4).

The titles of these reports show that NIER emphasized analyzing other countries' curricula, indicating that Japanese policymakers were genuinely starting to learn from international experiences. The BR project, in particular, contributed to Japan's CBE reform in two manners.

The first is about delocalizing the term "Q&A" through the project. In the current *CS2018*, cultivating the Q&A that all children should possess to cope with the new era is an essential goal. As a result, the concept of Q&A garnered significant attention from researchers both domestically and internationally. Unlike ZFL, which was superficially linked to CBE merely ideologically, Q&A is a dedicated term that the Japanese society purposefully redefined to borrow from the "global flows" of CBE reforms. As evidence of this, the *2016 report* includes the expression "Q&A (competencies)" (MEXT,2016, p30), suggesting that the correspondence between the two was somewhat recognized within the MEXT. The terms "*Shishitsu* (qualities)" and "*nōryoku* (abilities)" appeared in official documents long before the concept of ZFL was even proposed. In Japan, these two terms traditionally referred to various innate and acquired abilities without concern about CBE. Moreover, it was precisely Report 5 of the BR project, the most influential of the reports, that positioned Q&A as a comprehensive concept of competency, stating that "the term 'Q&A' is used as a comprehensive concept of ability that is more long-term and universally applicable than 'skill.'" (NIER,2013, p6) Since then, the term "Q&A," as discussed in Japan's basic education curriculum and related fields, has already shed its local meaning and been endowed with the character of an exclusive "translation" for the concept of competency, symbolizing the "global flows."

The second is the contribution of developing the 21S framework, which many researchers introduce as the Japanese version of KC (Lin, 2016, pp. 105–108). According to Report 5, "thinking competencies" form the core of this framework and are specifically defined as "the ability for each individual to learn and

make judgments independently, form their own opinions, (…) and identify the next question." "Basic competencies" are described as the foundational prerequisites that support "thinking competencies" and are explained as "the skills to effectively use language, numbers, and information (ICT) as tools according to the purpose." Finally, the role of "practical competencies" is to guide the application of "thinking competencies." This is "the ability to identify problems in everyday life, society, and the environment, mobilize one's knowledge to derive solutions…" (NIER,2013, p84)

Table 4 List of Reports from the BR Project

Title of Reports	Date of Publication
Report 1: Standards of Educational Curricula and Learning Assessment in Foreign Countries	2010.3
Report 2: Standards of Educational Curricula in Foreign Countries	2011.3
Report 3: Educational Curricula for Developing Q&A to Respond to Societal Changes	2012.3
Report 4: Standards of Educational Curricula in Various Countries: Recent Trends	2013.3
Report 5: Fundamental Principles of Curriculum Development for Cultivating Q&A	2013.3
Report 6: Educational Curricula and Q&A in Foreign Countries	2013.7
Report 7: Principles of Curriculum Standards for the Comprehensive Development of Q&A	2014.3

Source: https://www.nier.go.jp/05_kenkyu_seika/seika_digest_h25.html

3.2 The Naturalization of the "Global Flows" Narrative and the Transformation of SAA

The BR project marks the origin of Japan's narrative on CBE's "global flows." Many insights and evidence from the "Study Group" final report, a key reference for *CS2018* revisions, are derived from the BR project. The final report highlights a global trend of defining holistic abilities as "competencies" and setting policy goals based on them (MEXT, 2014a, p. 8). This statement portrays CBE as an international policy trend, frequently cited to validate CBE's "global flows" in various documents. In 2015, Tomoaki Matsuo, Chief Researcher at NIER, furthered this narrative in his book *What Are 21st Century Skills? —An International Comparison of CBE Reforms*, introducing cases from 12 countries across four continents, reinforcing CBE reforms as part of "global flows" (Matsuo, 2015).

The BR project aimed "to obtain fundamental materials related to the future development of educational curricula" (NIER, 2010, p. 8), aligning closely with CBE reform and curriculum structuring at the elementary and secondary levels. Efficient school system functioning was seen as essential for curriculum changes to have any educational impact. Since its partial revision in 2007, the School Education Act has upheld the cultivation of SAA as a core educational goal. This naturalization of "global flows" led to a transformation in SAA discourse, with the 2014 *HSUA Report* positioning instruction enhancement based on the "three elements of SAA" as key in HSUA reform (MEXT, 2014b). These elements, refined from the 2007 School Education Act and *CS2008*, retained identical descriptions for the first two elements, while the third evolved from "motivation to learn" to include "autonomy" and "collaboration." By 2016, "the three pillars of Q&A" proposed in the CS revision echoed this structure, with the first two elements unchanged and the third expanded to "the ability to engage in learning and humanity, etc." (MEXT, 2016, p. 30).

In the context of the development of the basic education curriculum, it is evident that the accumulation of long-standing debates in Japanese society regarding SAA and the underlying concept of *Gakuryoku* (academic abilities), based on the School Education Act, has been reflected in the revisions of the CS since the 1990s. However, ZFL, corresponding to the Basic Act on Education, has become a legitimate slogan or policy direction frequently mentioned in official documents with limited impact on the school's reality.

However, this does not imply that ZFL is unrelated to CBE implementation in Japan. The addition of

"humanity" in the "three pillars of Q&A" illustrates how ZFL's concept of "rich humanity" influenced the *CS2018* revision, serving as a compelling example. The next section explores this hybridization and MEXT's evolving diplomatic strategy.

3.3 The Diplomatic Strategic Shift of the MEXT

Shun Shirai, a MEXT bureaucrat, noted that the Ministry increasingly emphasized "promoting the strengths of Japanese education to enhance Japan's presence in the global educational field" (Shirai, 2020, p. 28). Since the early 2010s, MEXT has promoted Japanese educational experiences abroad in a new manner that prioritizes showing the goodness of Japanese education culture. For example, in March 2012, MEXT released a report outlining a new policy for Japan's educational cooperation (MEXT, 2012, p. 8). In April 2016, it established the Task Force for Strengthening Global Human Resource Development in Overseas Educational Institutions, releasing its strategic plan in May. The EDU-Port Nippon project was launched that year, with 104 overseas deployment projects implemented by 2023(financial year) across various educational levels and fields.

In this context, CBE's "global flows" narrative gained further attention in Japan and began to evolve. The 21S framework, constructed concerning the KC and similar frameworks from the OECD, EU, and major Western countries, is among the CBE-related concepts in Japan most consciously aligned with "global flows." These organizations and countries generally prioritize higher-order cognitive skills—such as problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking—to cultivate highly skilled industrial talent, a focus reflected in 21S. However, for MEXT, which was increasingly looking to export Japanese educational experiences abroad, aligning 21S, rooted in Western contexts, with Japan's advanced educational practices proved challenging. Consequently, while 21S is cited in related documents, it was not fully integrated into policy. For instance, the final "Study Group" report noted the framework's lack of holistic character (MEXT, 2014a, p12).

Holistic education "is based not on a mechanistic view of humanity, but on a holistic view," emphasizing the indivisibility of the human being as "life" (JHEA, 2005, pp. 18–26). In a prior study, a diachronic analysis of MEXT meeting minutes from 2012 to 2021 revealed a growing discourse in favor of "Japanese-style education" as an internationally advanced model reflecting holistic principles, evident in meetings like the CCE General Meeting and various Special Subcommittees (Min, 2021). This suggests that ZFL, focusing on "rich humanity" and a "healthy body," aligns more closely with holistic education principles than SAA, which emphasizes intellectual elements like knowledge, skills, and cognitive abilities.

This article argues that the somewhat abrupt inclusion of the "humanity" element in "the three pillars of Q&A" may result from an attempt to forcibly integrate the above-mentioned holistic education principles into the intellectually focused concept of SAA. In this regard, a series of projects and policy dialogue events related to CBE, promoted by both the Japanese government and the OECD, had a significant impact.

3.4 Strengthening Cooperation Between the Japanese Government and the OECD

The OECD, a key driver in the "global flows" of CBE reforms, has actively promoted a global governance framework for competency-oriented education. Since 2015, it has led the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project (*E2030 project*). In 2016, Dominique Simone Rychen, leader of the DeSeCo project, authored a working paper to underscore its continuity with the original project (Rychen,

2016). This paper advocated updating the KC framework to meet future needs, creating the "OECD Learning Compass 2030" (*Compass*) framework. As an OECD member, Japan played a central role in developing the *Compass* framework.

Following the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, the OECD, in partnership with MEXT, Fukushima University, and local communities, launched the "OECD *Tohoku School*" project (hereafter "*Tohoku School*") to support post-disaster recovery. This project, aimed at fostering human resources for economic revival, strengthened the cooperative relationship between Japan and the OECD.

Shirai notes that the "*Tohoku School*" project catalyzed the creation of the *E2030 project* and that the *Compass* framework reflects many aspects of Japanese educational philosophy and culture (Shirai, 2020, p. 24). For instance, while European countries raised concerns about including "values" within competencies due to differing religious perspectives, Japan and South Korea advocated for their inclusion, ultimately leading to an agreement (Shirai, 2020, pp. 31–32). This emphasis on "attitudes and values" within competencies underscores the alignment Japanese education policymakers see between holistic education principles and CBE.

This awareness has shaped Japan's stance in the international community and influenced domestic educational reforms. The inclusion of "humanity" in "the three pillars of Q&A" can be understood in this context. Initially, the "Study Group" report did not incorporate "humanity" within the Q&A framework. However, during the 2nd Japan-OECD Policy Dialogue on Education for 2030 held in Tokyo on June 29 of the same year, "Knowledge," "Skills," and "Character" were identified as core components of an internationally shared set of competencies. The *2016 report* drew on this to legitimize "the three pillars of Q&A" at the heart of *CS2018*. Additionally, influenced by COVID-19, the CCE issued the *2021 report* just a year before implementing the new CS. It emphasized that Japanese-style education supports intellectual, moral, and physical development by fostering a comprehensive understanding of students through diverse interactions. Citing OECD reports, it highlighted Japanese education as an exemplary model, noting that its success stems from providing a holistic education through activities like school meals and extracurriculars (MEXT, 2021, pp. 5–6), underscoring the alignment between holistic education and Japan's educational strengths.

4 Conclusion: Japan as a return adopter of CBE

This article revisited Japan's CBE reform history through three CS revisions, focusing on global policy borrowing. Japan consistently incorporated CBE as a central policymaking strategy, shifting from a "passive" to an "active" adoption form. It argues that Japan is both an "early and a return adopter," especially as "global flows" of CBE reforms gained traction under the OECD from the mid-2010s.

First, it was revealed that the "global flows" of CBE, which gained momentum following the OECD's proposal of the KC framework, occurred after the calls to develop ZFL and SAA within Japan. In this sense, it is inappropriate to illustrate the latter's emergence as a response to the "global flows." As this article concludes, the connection between ZFL and KC was a retrospective linkage and a passive "reception" to maintain the established educational policies in the post-*Yutori* era. However, Japan's learning from international experiences has become more substantive since the BR project in the early 2010s. Moreover, influenced by the government's diplomatic strategy shift, Japan's engagement with CBE

in the educational sphere transcended the typical "outside-in" borrowing model. It became an active "reception" (and a preparation for "sending") where the borrowed content was reinterpreted to justify the nation's educational system and culture while also aiming to enhance Japan's international presence.

This shift in nature naturally influences the outcomes of the "translation" of the competency concept within the country. Specifically, *Yutori* education was initially linked to local contexts and concerns within the local. Therefore, ZFL, paired with *Yutori*, is also detached from the context of CBE, reflecting a stance that supports the principle of holistic education (*Zenjin Kyoiku, 全人教育*) within Japanese society. Subsequently, as international competition intensified, discourses on human resource development from an industrial and economic perspective gradually became mainstream, and issues such as Japan's declining academic performance, exemplified by the "PISA shock," garnered significant attention. As a result, the *Yutori* reform "fell apart," leading to the reinforcement of the SAA. Meanwhile, the MEXT adopted a strategy of asserting the conceptual commonality between the OECD-promoting KC framework and ZFL to maintain consistency in its educational policies, thereby claiming the latter's legitimacy. Furthermore, they somewhat forcefully integrated SAA into the ZFL framework. Since the call for post-*Yutori* education, Japan's basic education sector has temporarily stabilized with a strategy to cope with the challenge to satisfy all stakeholders involved within the school system, which might be described as "the ZFL as the slogan and SAA as the actual direction." Subsequently, with the implementation of the BR project, Japanese society began to take an interest in international examples of CBE reform, leading to the creation of the 21S framework, which most faithfully reflects the "global flows." However, this article indicates that the 21S framework has not been sufficiently accepted in subsequent educational policies or the most recent *CS2018* revision. "The three pillars of Q&A" can be seen as inheriting the basic premise of SAA. However, from another perspective, adding the "humanity" element can be seen as a revival of ZFL and the holistic education philosophy underpinning it. It can also be interpreted as a result of Japan's diplomatic strategy to leverage packaged Japanese-style education in development and support initiatives.

IOs such as the OECD, the World Bank, and UNESCO have increasingly strengthened their influence in global education governance. As a result, countries can no longer ignore entirely the so-called "global flows" when formulating their education policies. However, the indications of this article illustrate that whether exploring trends in education policies and reforms of other countries or providing advice on domestic education policies, it is still crucial to recognize the dynamism of "global flows" and the agency of local contexts in the process of educational borrowing in policies and others.

Acronyms

ZFL	zest for living　[生きる力]
Q&A	qualities and abilities　[資質・能力]
21S	21st-century skills　[21 世紀型能力]
SAA	solid academic abilities　[確かな学力]
CS	Courses of Study　[学習指導要領]
CCE	Central Council for Education　[中央教育審議会]
HSUA	High School-University Articulation　[高大接続]

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グローバルな教育政策の借用のダイナミズムを捉え直す

― CBE の再帰的採用者としての日本を事例に―

閔　楽平

本研究は日本を、CBE の「グローバル潮流」における非西洋社会の初期採用者だけでなく、OECD による当該潮流の再強化と共に 2010 年代半ばから再び CBE 改革を本格的に取り組んだ「再帰的採用者」として捉え直すことを試みた。その主な結果は以下の通りである。

グローバルな政策借用の視点から見ると、日本におけるこの潮流への「受け入れ」は、受動的なものから能動的なものへと変化を遂げていることが明らかとなった。2000 年代初頭、「脱ゆとり教育」の背景において、文科省は既定の教育改革方針を維持するために、国際的な CBE の理念を受動的に「受け入れ」ざるを得なかったのである。しかし、時が経つにつれ、日本は CBE 改革の「グローバル潮流」を再解釈し、それを自国の教育制度や文化を正当化するために利用して自らの国際的プレゼンスを高めようとするようになった。したがって、日本における CBE 改革の「グローバル潮流」への借用過程は、国際的な経験から学ぶこと（外から内へ）から日本の経験を発信すること（内から外へ）へと徐々に移行し、そのコンピテンシー概念の「翻訳」もそれに伴い変化していった。この借用の性格変容は、CBE に結び付けられうる多様な能力モデルが混在する今の日本の状況とも繋がっていると思われる。

OECD、世界銀行やユネスコを代表とする国際組織は、教育政策のグローバルガバナンスにおける発言力をますます強めており、その結果、各国が教育政策を策定する際にいわゆる「グローバル潮流」を完全に無視することはできなくなっていることは事実であろう。しかし、本研究の結論は、他国の教育政策や改革の動向を探るにしても、自国の教育政策に助言を提供するにしても、いわゆる「国際標準」の流動性と、教育借用の過程におけるローカル文脈の主体性を十分に認識しなければならないことを示したのである。