Social and Employment Policy towards Social Inclusion of the Jobless Youth
Role of “Youth Support Station” in Japan

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Abstract

The focus on youth employment policy has been shifted to the discouraged workers. It is important to increase each job seeker’s employability to enhance their human security through stable employment. In this context, the “Youth Support Station” was established in 2006 to support youth who may lack the confidence to look for a job. This article attempts to understand the characteristics of support stations. It argues that the stations, although a nation-wide policy, two types of stations are observed. They are “social-independence-oriented” facilities and “economic-independence-oriented” facilities. The article also points out that various factors of social and employment policy have to be coordinated in order to achieve both social and economic independence of the youth.

Keywords: Youth Support Station, Unemployment, NEET, Social withdrawal, Social Inclusion
1 Introduction

Since the so-called “collapse of the bubble-economy” in 1992, the following ten years of recession have greatly affected almost every aspect of Japanese people’s daily life. Notably, unemployment has been a serious problem both politically and socially. Before that time, the unemployment rate in Japan had been considerably low, about 2%. Therefore, the shock was enormous when the unemployment hit 5% in 2003. Translated, this meant that more than three million people could not find employment in 2003.

The problem appeared with not only people who could not find employment but also with those who were able to find a job. The working environment has deteriorated in many ways in 2005. 924,000 people suffered from depression. Since 1998, over 30,000 people commit suicide every year. As a result of the deterioration, it became common knowledge that 30% of university graduates who find a job quit the job within three years. The data increases to 50% for high school graduates and 70% for junior high school graduate.

Only very recently, has it been recognised that there are socially excluded people who are not supported by any employment policy or through public employment service, “Hello Work”, nor welfare policy. These people in the “blind spot” include people who are not only looking for work but also those who wish to work, but are not looking for work because of various social obstacles.

This article argues that these people in the “blind spot” should be addressed and supported by some social inclusion policy. Luckily, since 2006 “Youth Support Station” has been established. This article will point out what has been done, and what should be done in the future.

2 Background of youth employment in Japan

2.1 Overall unemployment

A low unemployment rate had been one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Japanese economy. It is directly related to the so-called “three treasure” of the Japanese employment system; life-long employment, seniority-based wages and embedded labour union in companies\(^1\). However, that seems to be changing since 1990’s. Table 1 shows long-term shift of employment rate.

The increase in unemployment continued until very recently, and for the first time

\(^1\) See Seike (2004)
ever, from 2002 to 2004, the rate exceeded 5%. This means that there were more than three million unemployed people in the Japanese labour force.

No doubt, there have been many studies by government officials and scholars about employment issues. In fact, they are so numerous to summarise here. However, there are some significant studies. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2004) explains long term trend of related indicators\(^2\). According to this, a mismatch between vacant jobs and job-seeking people explains large part of the growing unemployment in Japan. On 3.29 million unemployed people, 1.09 million (33.1 % of the unemployed) claimed that there is no desired job, while 0.74 million (22.5%) claimed that age requirement of vacant job is inappropriate for them.

Graph 1 shows number of unemployment sorted by reason for seeking a job. According to this graph, it is clear that number of people who quit a job involuntary increased drastically from 2002 to its peak in 2003 resulting in the highest ever unemployment rate in Japan at the same time\(^3\).

Unemployment itself can be explained by ordinary economic theories. It can be argued that increases of youth unemployment are a natural outcome as the Japanese economy was in recession since mid-90s. From this viewpoint, youth unemployment would decrease naturally when the economy recovers. This seemed true, according to the Graph 1, since involuntary unemployment had decreased rapidly since 2003, and in 2005, voluntary unemployment exceeded involuntary unemployment.

However, behind this sharp decline of unemployment, it should be also mentioned that employment rate has been falling. This means that a certain number of people have

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3) See table 1 too. See table 1 too.
been discouraged to work, or even to try to look for a job.

Economically non-active people can be distinguished into three categories, people who are mainly engaged in education, or in house work, or in the other things. Japanese definition of NEET\(^4\) is calculated in this last category. Those whose age is between 15 and 34 who are not working, nor engaged in school, nor in housework. 640,000 people were estimated to be in this NEET category in 2003. It was about 2.0 % of total population of the same age group. Half of NEET in Japan expresses their wish to work. However, they are somehow discouraged to work and stopped to look for a job.

In the worst case, NEET could become socially withdrawn. The definition of “social withdrawal” is as follows; non-participation in society for more than 6 months and mental disease is not likely the prime reason for the situation\(^5\). The other definition is; long term loss of or limited social life other than his/her house for various reasons\(^6\).

### 2.2 Social obstacles in Japan

Why are people discouraged to work when they are unemployed and classified as NEET? There are social obstacles and social recognition on work, which prevent the unemployed youth from returning to labour market.

In general, youth labour have a disadvantage compared to elder workers since they are less trained or have less experience. In other words, young workers have less human

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4) “NEET” was originally mentioned in UK in 1999 by the government report “Bridging the Gap” by Social Exclusion Unit
6) National Institute of Mental Health, National Center of Nerology and Psychiatry. For more detail, see http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2003/07tp0728-1.html (in Japanese)
capital compared to that of elder workers. Companies are likely to choose more productive worker to fill their vacancies. However, in Japan, companies’ own training and education programmes have been one of the characteristics to increase workers’ human capital. These education and training systems have worked as an incentive to work longer in the same company and maintained life-long employment. In this context, companies prefer younger workers who can absorb company-specific knowledge and skill more readily than already established workers. In other words, Japanese companies value the potential of young workers. This trend significantly improved general status of young employees, especially upon finding their first job immediately after graduation from school.

However, during the recession, companies reduced their investment on training and education of new recruits. Graph 2 points out the decline in share of training cost on labour cost. While it has been claimed that in-company education and training in Japanese companies are key characteristics of the life-long employment system, it had changed drastically in reality.

This companies’ behaviour damaged severely on young people’s job opportunity and chance to find a job, though it might be a rational reaction from an economic sense. Since there is only one functional transition process from school to work, the workers who failed the initial process have limited choices of work. This applies to people who quit school before getting a job, as well as those who quit a job within very short period of time. To sum up the situation, the social obstacle for the young people is that there are limited pathways

Graph 2  Share of training cost on labour cost (%)
with a limited period of time to gain access into the labour market for young people. Those who have missed the first opportunity would most likely turn to part-time jobs, or be unemployed.

Deteriorated quality of youth labour market has been concealed by contradicting social recognition and ethics about young people’s life styles and work ethics. The working ethic in Japan is considerably strong. As a reflection of the reality of low unemployment and male bread-winner-model of social welfare, having steady work immediately after graduation is a prerequisite to being regarded as socially and economically independent. This implies that social appreciation of people who are not working when they should be, is significantly low. Youth jobless people suffer multiple shock by not having a job and a salary, and by not been recognised as contributed to society. It is this feeling which prevents them from looking for a job. Discouraged people lack the confidence to look for a job or even work again because of their past trauma. Negative circle would be induced by not working. By not working, they lose confidence to work again.

Graph 3 shows the proportion of respondents who rarely or never spend time with friends, with colleagues, or with others in social groups. Japan has very high percentage in this proportion. This also implies that a loss of one’s job is likely to lead to a loss of social connection. If he/she has lost a social connection, he/she easily loses employability overtime, which leads to being unemployed and discouraged overtime. Socially isolated people often enter negative circles of social exclusion.

Graph 3  Proportion of respondents who rarely or never spend time with friends, with colleagues, or with others in social groups, 1999-2002 (%)
2.3 People who need support

As mentioned previously, social obstacles are for everyone and therefore, to some extent, social support must be delivered to everyone. However, the necessity might vary. Figure 1 shows general classification of workers and non-workers.

Statistical classification usually divides people into three groups; the employed, the unemployed and not economically active. In this figure, people who are not in work are sorted by their behaviour and will to work. The first category is a person who is not working, but looking for a job. This represents the traditional definition of unemployment. The second category is a person who wishes to work, but not actually looking for a work. The people in the third category express no wish to work. Of course, house wives who are content to stay at home and not doing paid-work would be in this category. Therefore when Japanese version of NEET is discussed, spouses are excluded from NEET category, even though all other aspects of joblessness are applicable.

What kind of support they need will be reviewed in the next section.

3 Policies to support youth

3.1 Overview

For long time, employment policy on the young people was practically neglected for several reasons. First reason is that the young people's unemployment was regarded as voluntary and temporally, even for selfish reasons, such as lack of endurance. In labour
economics, matching theory explains that inexperienced workers have to take time and opportunities to find a suitable workplace and environment for themselves. Therefore, young people’s unemployment was regarded as a normal and necessary activity of readjustment for both workers and companies.

The second reason was that the social and political focus had been on elder people’s job security. Unemployment was regarded as losing one’s job. Long-term recession forced companies to reduce labour costs, and elder people were afraid of losing their jobs. However, what happened behind the scenes was that companies stopped hiring new graduates as compensation.

However, the seriousness of the situation of young people has changed the focus of employment policy. Policies to support young people have been established from many directions. One of the first policy frameworks was called “Youth Independence and Challenge Plan” in 2003. In this action plan, so-called “job-cafés” were established as public employment services for people younger than 34 years old. These cafés were designed to be one-stop service centres of employment issues so that job-seekers can take various job aptitude tests, counselling and training for job referrals, not to mention referring information of job vacancies. The plan has re-established next year as “the Action Plan towards Independence and Challenge of the Young People”. The focus of these plans were on economic independence of young part-timers, while less attention was paid on the unemployed young people, NEET or people with severe employment difficulties. As reflection of the focus, “probationary period employment” has been introduced to promote young unemployed people to attain full-time job. These policies represented solid social ethics that people have to work in full-time working style. However, the reason why the young people could not achieve full-time employment was not only because of their own lack of employability, but also because of the economic condition when they were looking for a job.

In 2005, the Cabinet Office announced a report on comprehensive independence of the young people. In this report, NEET and the social withdrawal were paid more attention than part-time workers. It pointed out that their lack of social connection deprived them of various opportunities to gain abilities which young people should have attained until they become adulthood.

Clear distinction between social independence and economic independence were established at this stage. Economic independence or, in other words, occupational independence represents independence from parents economically by earning their own

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7) See Genda(2001). For further reference, issue 32 of “Social Science Japan” may be helpful. See http://newslet.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/ssj32/ssj32.pdf
living through employment. While the economic independence has been paid attention for so long, this report did not emphasise the type of employment. Part-time workers have been accepted as necessary or inevitable as first step towards sustainable employment. Social independence was highly arguable concept. It represents various aspects of social life of the young people. Mental independence from their parents was included as well as having friends or paying enough attention on society’s issues. It is also important that the report mentioned that individual cases should be considered to value their own economic and social independence. This was a significant difference from previous emphasis on full-time employment for all young people.

Figure 2 shows an overview of support policies and its flow. To prevent young people to have severe difficulties, early intervention in school age is necessary. There is growing number of support for children who suffer from mal-adjustment, which easily lead the children to lack of educational attainment and qualification.

Socially withdrawn people are cared by various services for them. There are NPO’s for those who cannot communicate with families or people other than families. In serious cases, these socially withdrawn people need mental care services through local services and/ or NPOs.

There are many services, both private and public, to support people who are looking for a job. As mentioned above, there are public employment services, so called “Hello Work” and “Job Café”. Both are designed to be one-stop centre. If a job seeker has certain level of market value in labour market, he or she can register in private human resource

Fig. 2 Flow of support for youth
agencies. There are many channels and opportunities once they start looking for a job.

However, one has to visit and register the public employment services to utilise those services. As shown in figure 4, there had been no support for NEET unless they actually look for a job, or they become social withdrawal. Those who cannot visit those public services are remained unsupported, until they become socially isolated. The role of “Youth Support Station” is to fill up this policies’ gap between social independence and economic independence.

3.2 “Youth Support Station”

The Stations have been established by Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2006. As a main component of government plan called “Model Policy for Youth Independence Support Network at local community”, 25 locations have been selected for the first year, and then expanded to 50 in 2007. The location disperses nation-wide, only Akita, Gifu, Wakayama, Shimane and Miyazaki prefectures do not establish the station in 2007.

Each station’s management is consigned to various organisations, such as NPOs, stock companies, social welfare organisations or incorporated foundations. Graph 4 shows the ratio of consigned organisations among 50 Stations. Those who are consigned applied to the project along side with each prefecture’s recommendation to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

There are three tasks for the Support Stations. First of them is individual counselling. It includes career counselling as well as mental and psychological counselling. Career

Graph 4 Classification of the 50 Support Stations by consigned organisations

8) For basic information, there are 47 prefectures in Japan, and these five prefectures’ location can be found at http://www.japan-guide.com/list/e1002.html for example.
counsellor and clinical psychologist play main role for this task\textsuperscript{9).} Usually, a client can chose from two kinds of counselling. In some cases, career counsellor may ask psychologist’s opinion in case that the client might have mental handicap.

The second task for the Station is to provide programmes for promoting awareness of occupation. Various opportunities to have working experience are provided. Some are for a few hours of job experience while some can be 2 weeks of full-time on-the-job training. In-house seminars by people who are in actual business field compliment those training programmes. Agricultural experience in local farm is also very popular program. Another popular program is voice training. Clients become used to speak confidently by singing and speaking laud in front of people.

The third task is networking organisations among local community. It is obvious, from fig 2, that the Station has to cooperate with other organisations, since its function for job reference is limited. In this sense, public employment services are vitally important. The Station is also expected to be a refer-acceptance from mental health services or psychiatrist. For those organisations and psychiatrists, it is important for their client to have some level of social activities other than medical treatment. Of course, employment is the most important for most cases. However, public employment services refer these kinds of clients back to social services. The Support Station is designed to be a place to prepare for a job-hunting activity. Local employer’s organisations such as the chamber of commerce are also key actors. With their approval and support, local employers would allow the Stations’ clients to visit the local workplaces for trial, experience and part-time job.

There is growing needs for visiting support for people who have difficulties to come to the station, or to any other social services, i.e. for literally withdrawn people. As mentioned previously, socially withdrawn people often have difficulties to go out and meet someone who are not their family members. In such case, parents usually come to stations at first, and then talk about it within the family. Some potential clients become interested by hearing the parents’ impression about the station. However, some remains still at home. Then parents can ask the Station’s staff to come to their house. Visiting support can be regarded as utmost form of personalised support.

3.3 Classification of the Stations

Since the Stations are consigned organisations, there are significant differences among the stations. For example, some are very close to the local train station, while the

\textsuperscript{9) In Japan, there is no nationally licensed counsellor for career and/or for mental health. However, for clinical psychologist, there is the dominant organisation to issue the license and it is necessary to have it to work in the support station. To lesser extent, for career counsellor, there are several private foundations to issue the similar licenses (ex. Career Development Advisor, Career Development Facilitator). In some cases, one does not have to have any license to work as a career counsellor if the one is capable.
other is located quite distant from it. Some Stations uses local government’s facility for their office\textsuperscript{10}, while the other has their own office. The Stations can be divided in two types by summing up their major characteristics.

Following table is the overview of the distinction. First type of the station can be named as “social independence support oriented” facility, while the other “economic independence oriented”.

Prior to further discussion, it should be mentioned that the distinction of these two Stations is simplified and ideal. Every station has mixed aspects of these two characteristics to some extent. Classification is made on the ratio of its mixture.

As a goal of the Station, a social independence oriented facility aims social independence, while economic oriented facility aims economic independence. Social independence means, in this case, communication with other people. In that case, coming to the Station itself can be regarded as an achievement. Economic independence represents getting a job, whether full-time or part-time. For this goal, main client for a social independence support oriented station would be socially withdrawn youth, or NEET with no wish to work. On the contrary, NEET who wish to work or who are actually looking for a job would be best supported by an economic independence oriented facility.

Activities which the Station would focus are also different. For individual support, mental and/or psychological counselling would be vital for a client in a social independence oriented facility. However, communication programme with other clients might be effective for the clients who are expected to gain communication skills. As a social independence

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<th>Social independence oriented</th>
<th>Economic independence Oriented</th>
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<td>Goal</td>
<td>Social independence</td>
<td>Economic independence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client</td>
<td>NEET with no wish to work, Social Withdrawal</td>
<td>NEET who wish to work, Unemployed youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Individual: mental counselling Group: easy job-training, communication programme</td>
<td>Individual: Career counselling, support for job-hunting process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Clinical psychologist, mental counsellor</td>
<td>Career counsellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility</td>
<td>Cosy, at-home-feeling, allowing music, comic, game</td>
<td>Quiet, calm counselling environment, clean atmosphere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Similar organisations</td>
<td>Mental health care services (public, NPO)</td>
<td>Public employment services (Hello Work, Job Café), private human resource agencies</td>
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\textsuperscript{10} Usually, NPO incubation centre or public employment service's building are lent to the Station.
oriented facility, to bring potential client into the station would be the biggest task. After bringing the client in, their support is to give the client comfort, which they did not have when they are at home. On the contrary, in an economic independence oriented station, main individual programme is career counselling\(^\text{11}\). Individual support for practical job-hunting may be particularly useful for a client with special needs\(^\text{12}\). Since the clients often suffer from empty period of time or lack of qualification when they write their CVs, individual and tailor-made support for each case is necessary component.

This difference of activities affects to staff’s diversity. In a social independence facility, in order to give mental and/or psychological counselling, clinical psychologist and/or mental counsellor are required and playing a major role. Career counsellors play major role in counselling oriented stations on the contrary. In such case, a clinical psychologist may help other career counsellors to support a client who may have mental obstacles, which usually beyond career counsellors’ cardinal field. A career counsellor may refer such client to a fellow clinical psychologist, or may ask the fellow to supervise his or her counselling. A career counsellor in a social independence oriented facility must be recognised to have plenty of knowledge and experience in mental health.

Since the main purpose of a social independence oriented facility is social independence, it is important to create cozy, at-home atmosphere inside the facility. Background music may facilitate conversation among clients and staff. Comics, games, plastic models and cute dolls can be a good entrance point to start conversation. These items are often placed in free space, where clients can stay with minimum observation from staff. On the other hand, an economic independence oriented facility does not necessarily require free space to chat. In order to maximise effect of counselling, they often arrange room into quiet and calm space. They often do not have free space for clients to communicate each other. In such case, they organise group events and parties to make friends, communicate each other under certain number of staff’s supervision.

Overlap of other government policy is critically important to both facilities. For a social independence oriented facilities, socially withdrawn people might be well treated under psychiatrists’ treatment. For that purposes, local institutes of mental health can play very similar role for this issue. It is necessary to establish close communication among these facilities and create mutual consent on division of work. On the contrary, public employment services can offer various career counselling which an economic independence oriented facility can offer too. The difference can be degree of reception during counselling. A client has to be ready to claim their preferences to visit public employment services, while

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\(^{11}\) Needless to say, a good career counselling often handle various aspects of life and mentality.

\(^{12}\) Writing a resume is a good example. In Japan, a blank period in CV is unacceptable. This custom is one of practical obstacles for NEET job-seekers.
he or she can prepare for it in the Support Stations.

3.4 Achievement and challenge

It is too early to evaluate the achievements of the station since it has been just one year even for leading 25 stations and just a few months for other 25 stations. However, noticeable result has been informed.

In average, almost 10% of clients become employed both full-time and part-time as a result of continuous support. Interestingly, this rate is almost the same among the Stations nationally. It is also reported that noticeable improvements of communication and mental skill could be recognised among almost all clients.

There are difficulties on how the stations are evaluated adequately. There are three concerns on the evaluation. Firstly, interpretation of 10% as employment rate can be ambiguous number. Among people who have been socially withdrawn for a long time, it is even miraculous to find a job within a few months of support. It is natural to consider that even 10% is great achievement since the station’s focus is to support people who have more difficulties than the other young people.

This leads to the second point. If an employment rate itself is not sufficient, a complementary index would be required. In that sense, improvement of clients could be an appropriate for the evaluation. However, improvements in that way can be misleading, since it can be subjective and arbitrary index. If the original state of clients has been socially withdrawal, coming to the station and talking to other people can be regarded as an improvement from the original state. If positive results are only coming to the Station, whether it can be claimed as a success would be a remaining question.

The third difficulty is how to calculate ‘value for money’ on this policy. While the numerator is total amount of budget for the policy, the denominator can be arguable. Narrowest possibility is number of people who successfully find a job through the stations’ support. Then, as 10% of clients have found a job, individual cost would be estimated very high. To avoid this misinterpretation, it seems advisable to include each client’s improvement into the denominator. However, this leads to the previous question of subjectivity of measuring improvements.

Possible alternative for this dilemma would be including number of referred clients to public employment service into clients who found a job. These referred clients are clearly looking for a job, but not yet found one, in other words, they become unemployed from non-active status. This clearly shows their progress towards inclusion into the society.
4 Conclusion

As stated above, there is negative circle for the young workers once they secede from an ordinary life-course, which are full-time education, full-time employment. People in NEET category have to wait until they are mentally and physically unhealthy to be helped by social policy, or have to commit themselves to start looking for a job despite all the obstacles they have with only support from family. The “Youth Support Stations” are one of policies to fill the gap between social policy and employment policy.

In 2008, the number of the Stations is expected to be doubled. Density of support will increase by that. It is important for the supported people and their family to have the Stations nearby.

For future research, one thing should be mentioned. Since 2003, Japanese economy has been recovering gradually. The noticeable point is that the degree of recovery varies considerably among prefectures. New job vacancies can be most found at Tokyo area, Aichi area and to lesser extent, Hokuriku-area. In these regions, especially part-time job can be found very easily for the young job-seekers. What would happen then is that people who visit the Support Station may have severer difficulties under such good conditions. Counsellors and staff in such regions have to bear in mind the rapid change of employment condition.
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