

Summary of Research Findings on the Current State of the Credit System and Its Substantive Implementation (2023-2024)

Abstract

This research study re-examines the institutional meaning and premises of the academic credit system in Japan, which lacks a sufficiently shared understanding despite serving as the foundation of university education. It aims to clarify the contemporary status of the system and organize the discourse surrounding its "substantive implementation." Rather than evaluating the system as a direct tool for measuring learning outcomes, this study conceptualizes it as an institutional framework interconnected with degree systems and quality assurance. Through a historical analysis of the U.S., Europe, and Japan and a supplemental university survey, this study analyzes the system's structural characteristics and the diversity of institutional interpretations. This enables a repositioning of recent policy trends toward institutional flexibility, such as the 2022 regulatory reforms, within the broader context of how the credit system is fundamentally understood and operated in Japan. The findings reveal that the credit system inherently possesses structural ambiguity and normativity, and that the challenges of "substantive implementation" cannot be reduced to operational errors. This report provides a foundational perspective for future discussions on quality assurance and degree systems.

1. Members of the Research Committee

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2. Background and Objectives

2.1 Background

The academic credit system in Japan has been updated following the October 2022 amendments to the Standards for Establishment of Universities. These revisions introduced greater regulatory flexibility, including more flexible approaches to credit calculation and academic calendar design. While these changes expanded institutional discretion, they also heightened the responsibility of universities to design student learning appropriately and ensure the "substantive realization" of learning activities.

This challenge, however, is not new. Since the mid-2000s, starting with the 2005 report "Future of Higher Education in Japan," national policy discussions have repeatedly pointed to the discrepancy between formal standards and actual practice. Subsequent reports on undergraduate education and "quality transformation" have consistently highlighted the need to increase students' independent study time. Today, with the expansion of online and digitally mediated education, the question of how universities can effectively ensure meaningful student learning has become even more pressing.

Despite these persistent calls for "substantiation," there has been insufficient dialogue regarding what the credit system fundamentally represents in the Japanese context. Without a shared understanding of the system's structural logic, further deregulation may lead to a hollowing out of the system rather than to its improvement.

2.2 Objectives

Against this background, this study re-examines the institutional meaning and structural foundations of the academic credit system. Moving beyond discussions of mere regulatory compliance, this research seeks to:

- Clarify the conceptual and structural properties that define the Japanese credit system.
- Identify the latent institutional premises through a historical comparative analysis of the U.S., Europe, and Japan.
- Reposition contemporary debates on substantiation and flexibility within these theoretical and historical contexts.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the academic credit system as an institutional framework. The focus is on clarifying conceptual structures, historical processes, and contemporary policy debates rather than empirical evaluation of educational outcomes. The analysis centers on a literature review of prior research, policy documents, and institutional regulations. This is complemented by a comparative historical study of American, European, and Japanese systems. Furthermore, a questionnaire survey of universities was conducted between September and October 2024 to capture institutional perceptions and practices regarding the current academic credit system, efforts to ensure the substantive realization of student learning, and responses to the greater flexibility introduced by the 2022 amendments to the Standards for Establishment of Universities. As summarized in Table 1, responses were received from 490 universities (a 62.5% response rate). These results are not intended to show statistical representativeness but are used to illustrate trends and the diversity of institutional interpretations and organizational constraints.

Table 1. Survey Distribution and Response Rate

| Category | Value |
|------------------------------------|--------|
| Universities Surveyed (Total Sent) | 784 |
| Valid Responses Received | 490 |
| Response Rate | 62.5 % |

4. Scope and Study Items

The study focuses on the institutional framework of the academic credit system, particularly within undergraduate education. Its scope is limited to the institutional framework itself, rather than individual course evaluations or student-level learning outcomes. The inquiry centers on the following items:

- **Conceptual Analysis:** Examination of modularism (organizing degrees through credit-bearing courses), input-time standards, and the hybridity of requirements and norms.
- **Historical Evolution:** Transformation of the system from its origins in the U.S. to its current form in Japan.
- **Contemporary Policy and Practice:** Issues of quality assurance and institutional flexibility, supported by survey data on academic calendars, "cap" systems, and faculty perceptions.

Note: The survey data is intended to illustrate trends and diversity rather than provide an

exhaustive statistical evaluation or specific policy recommendations.

5. Analysis

5.1 Conceptual and Structural Characteristics: Time as a Proxy

The credit system functions as institutional infrastructure for structuring degree programs. While it is often discussed in terms of educational quality, its primary role is to enable curricular organization, clarification of degree requirements, and institutional coordination. Central to this is modularism, where degree programs are aggregates of learning units. This structure allows for flexibility in design and student choice while enabling credit transfer and standardization. Furthermore, because learning outcomes are difficult to measure directly and uniformly, the system relies on input-time standards as a proxy. However, in practice, credits often lose their function of controlling student effort and instead become internal management indicators used to weight courses within a curriculum. Critically, the system allows verifiable "requirements" (class hours) to coexist with "norms" (out-of-class study). This inherent ambiguity is not merely a flaw but a structural characteristic that enables the system to function across diverse contexts, although it creates a constant tension between formal compliance and substantive practice.

5.2 Historical Formation: De-contextualization and Adaptation

The credit system emerged in the early 20th-century U.S. to accommodate the expansion and diversification of higher education, providing a standardized tool for curricular organization and student mobility. In this context, it was closely linked to accreditation and quality assurance, ensuring comparability across decentralized systems. In Japan, the system was introduced via postwar reforms based on the U.S. model. However, differences in educational culture and institutional practices led to a unique transformation. Specifically, the concept of out-of-class study failed to take root, making class hours the de facto standard. Furthermore, Japanese policy historically treated the credit system as a framework for reconciling general and professional education or as a tool for rationalization during expansion, rather than a fundamental educational question. This historical trajectory explains why "substantive implementation" remains a persistent challenge rooted in the process of institutional transplantation.

5.3 Contemporary Arguments: The Barriers of Academic Management

Debates on "substantive implementation" emphasize the alignment between credit counts and actual learning volume. However, the system's structural assumption of homogeneous learning

conditions for full-time students often constrains these efforts. Consequently, tensions arise in academic calendar management and the allocation of credit hours. Changes in job-seeking practices have further affected learning loads and examination formats, necessitating flexibility beyond the traditional 1,350-minute standard (equivalent to 15 sessions of 90 minutes each). While universities attempt policy measures such as cap systems and multiple-session-per-week classes, their success depends heavily on faculty perceptions, including limited recognition of the expected volume of out-of-class study associated with each credit. Where the principle that university education presupposes an integrated combination of structured instruction and independent learning is not widely shared, the institutional foundation of the credit system itself becomes unstable. Structural barriers include the tension between faculty-driven course design and program-level curriculum coherence, as well as the difficulty of reaching an organizational consensus on streamlining curricula. The hollowing out of "caps" and the long-standing practice of once-weekly classes remain major obstacles to intensive student learning.

5.4 Operational Realities: Institutional Inertia and the "Closed" System

Findings from the 2024 questionnaire survey of Japanese universities indicate that while institutional flexibility (e.g., varied academic calendars) is formally available, its adoption remains limited. This reflects a strong institutional inertia, where university operations are bound by existing customs and organizational constraints. These barriers are not merely clerical; they are rooted in internal dynamics, such as differing faculty perceptions of "quality" and concerns over increased workloads. Furthermore, while Western models developed with "circulation" (credit transfer) in mind, the Japanese system evolved as a tool for autonomous institutional management, resulting in an "institutionally closed" curriculum. This makes it difficult for regulatory relaxation to result in an "opening" of the system. The findings suggest that addressing these barriers requires more than technical adjustments; it necessitates a systematic governance framework that clarifies the limits of flexibility and the allocation of decision-making authority amid strong institutional inertia. The persistent gap between assumed learning time and actual student effort must be understood not as an operational failure, but as a consequence of a structure that combines requirements and norms in a way that allows for a certain degree of inherent ambiguity.

6. Key Findings

(1) Function as a "Proxy Infrastructure": The credit system operates not as a precise tool for

measuring learning outcomes, but as an institutional "proxy infrastructure" based on time proxies and modularism. Its primary function has been the formal organization of degree programs rather than the representation of substantive learning reality.

(2) Inherent Ambiguity and Structural Tension: The system possesses an intrinsic ambiguity, characterized by the coexistence of verifiable regulatory requirements and normative pedagogical expectations. This creates a persistent tension between formal compliance (external) and substantive educational practice (internal).

(3) Historical Path Dependency: The challenges of "substantiating" the credit system are deeply rooted in the history of institutional transplantation. In the Japanese context, the system evolved into a tool for internal curriculum coordination and institutional stability, rather than a mechanism for international student mobility or credit transfer.

(4) Limits of Flexibility and Trust: While regulatory flexibility has increased to accommodate student diversity, its effectiveness is hindered by a lack of shared understanding regarding "learning time." The substantiation of out-of-class study remains the most fragile point of trust within the system's qualitative basis.

(5) Shift from Technical Adjustment to Structural Redefinition: Substantiating the credit system is not a mere technical or administrative task. It requires a fundamental shift from socially embedded, conventional practices to a learning-centered structure. This necessitates a systematic governance framework involving not only individual universities but also policy authorities and society at large.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the contemporary status of the credit system in Japan from conceptual, historical, and policy perspectives. The analysis reveals that the credit system functions as a "proxy infrastructure," whose inherent ambiguity constitutes a condition of its operation. Current challenges are not merely operational but structural, rooted in the historical and institutional context of the system's introduction. The system is now confronted with three interrelated issues: substantive implementation, responsiveness to the diversification and innovation of university education, and system governance.

The limited shared understanding of learning time as a foundational principle of the credit system indicates the fragility of the qualitative basis of university education. At the same time, although regulatory flexibility has expanded, the limits of such flexibility and the allocation of decision-making authority remain insufficiently clarified, underscoring the need for a systematic governance framework. Given the institutional inertia of higher education, formal reform alone cannot ensure effective change. From the perspective of quality assurance and sustainability, continuous examination is required to distinguish institutional elements that must be preserved from those that may be relaxed.

Moreover, because the credit system has been structured primarily around time investment, it has had limited capacity to address the qualitative dimensions of learning outcomes. In practice, credits function less as transferable measures of learning than as internal indicators of curricular weight within individual universities. Consequently, reform of the credit system requires not only technical adjustments but also a reconsideration of the principles underlying curriculum and course design more broadly.

Redefining the nature and function of the credit and enhancing its transferability, thereby opening institutionally closed curricula, are essential for ensuring the systemic integrity of Japanese higher education and for enabling universities to develop as organizations that foster intellectual creativity. The findings of this study are intended to contribute to more theoretically grounded and systematic dialogue within quality assurance frameworks.