
Introduction

Transition from School to Working Life for Japanese University Students

Thus far, the *Japan Labor Review (JLR)* has turned its attention repeatedly to the transition from school to work as experienced by young people in Japan. “The Transition from School to Working Life Issues” (Vol. 2, No. 3, 2005) pointed out that among youth in Japan the move from school to work was rapidly diversifying from its classic pattern of a direct transition with no interlude, and outlined specific examples. The topic of “career education,” initiated in response to the evolving employment situation, was addressed in “Current Study on Career Education in Japan” (Vol. 8, No. 1, 2011).

The current issue focuses on how the transition from school to working life is changing for Japanese young people in an era of increasing universality of higher education. Japanese institutions of higher education fall into three categories: four-year universities (hereinafter referred to as “universities”), two-year colleges (“junior colleges”), and vocational schools that provide occupational education and training exclusively. Until the 1980s, higher education policies kept rates of advancement to university low at approximately 30% of the college-age cohort, and university education was seen as highly academic. During the 1990s, however, a shift in higher education policy and a lower birth rate made entrance to university easier, and the labor market for high school graduates worsened, bringing the university advancement rate above 50%, and the total percentage of students attending school at least until age 20 above 70% when junior colleges and vocational schools are included.

Japan’s universities are characterized by the fact that despite their being institutions of higher education serving at least half the members of each generation, the system does not provide for “functional specialization” of education. Policymakers have repeatedly attempted to implement policies that encourage functional specialization, but these have failed to produce results in the face of resistance from universities.

In reality, however, university education in Japan has a pyramidal structure based on the degree of difficulty of entrance to specific universities. Highly prestigious universities are seen as institutions of research and are expected to compete successfully against their overseas counterparts. Among less prestigious universities, there are some that have been compelled to emphasize formation of basic academic skills and guidance in living as an adult member of the workforce. Japanese universities are faced with the contradictory tasks of providing education to new types of non-elite students, and providing “global education” that lives up to the standards of the world. For this reason it is difficult to approach Japan’s universities consistently as a single category of educational institution, from both educational and career perspectives. Japanese society as a whole lacks a common, shared understanding of the relevant issues.

With this in mind, this issue of *JLR* presents four articles that provide up-to-date in-

sights enabling readers overseas to comprehend the current status of university education in Japan. Motohisa Kaneko's article paints an overall picture of higher education and work in Japan; Hitoshi Nagano's discusses trends in corporate hiring practices; an article by Akiyoshi Yonezawa focuses on the globalization of Japan's universities; and Koh Igami's article discusses the current outlook for non-elite university students.

Kaneko's "Higher Education and Work in Japan: Characteristics and Challenges" uses the term "J-mode" to describe the framework for transition from higher education to work prevalent in Japan thus far. Put simply, "J-mode" emphasizes the particular skills required in the corporate workforce, and the fact that Japanese firms prefer to hire fresh college graduates whose abilities will be progressively cultivated once they are hired, but also focus on the exclusivity of the universities new recruits graduated from, as indicators of the trainability of these recruits. Under these circumstances, the specific content of university studies has little relevance to future jobs, in terms of actually being put to use in the workplace. "J-mode" has functioned as an efficient system thus far, but since the 1990s the worsening labor market for university graduates has presented challenges, due largely to a drastic rise in the university participation rate.

However, while "J-mode" may have weakened, it has not been completely replaced by an alternative. As the article discusses, potentially effective measures for improving the situation include enhancement of the relation between college education and work, cultivation of basic competencies, and styles of learning that encourage greater student participation.

Nagano's "Trends in Corporate Hiring of Recent Graduates: Focus on Developments since the Global Financial Crisis" explores, through surveys of corporate employers, the status of Japanese corporations' still-prevalent custom of hiring new university graduates en masse each year. This tendency stems from employers' demand for "white cloth," an analogy equating these new graduates to white cloth that can be dyed any color, i.e. molded to fit the employer's corporate culture. In 2007, however, hiring of mid-career personnel was on the rise, and the trend was expected to take hold to a certain extent.

However, things changed as a result of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. Surveys after these events indicated that despite increasingly urgent calls for Japanese companies to adapt to global standards, recruiting young people fresh out of school remains the linchpin of these companies' hiring practices. Today a recovering economy is expected to bring a further rise in hiring of mid-career human resources, but no change in the widespread preference for hiring new graduates is expected. Nagano's article suggests that Japanese enterprises' style of cultivating human resources is not easily changed, and in fact appears self-perpetuating. Researchers' views on the subject are divided, and we are awaiting the results of further investigation into this area.

While the practice of hiring new university graduates en masse is holding firm, university education itself is facing pressure to reform due to various circumstances. The two

articles outlined below focus on the two key trends visible in Japanese university education today, namely globalization and universalization.

Yonezawa's "Japan's Challenge of Fostering "Global Human Resources": Policy Debates and Practices" describes the current status of, and challenges facing, the cultivation of "global human resources" which is gaining traction at Japan's elite universities, including how this endeavor impacts employment of university graduates. According to Yonezawa, from an international standpoint, cultivation of global human resources as practiced in Japan is remarkable in that it is heavily promoted as a means of producing human resources that meet the needs of domestic Japanese companies. At the same time, as described in Nagano's article as well, there has been little fundamental change to Japanese firms' hiring practices or cultivation of personnel, and the measures being taken by various universities lack consistency, meaning that efforts to produce globally viable human resources are inadequate in practical terms. That said, the task of globalizing universities is a challenging one, involving overhauling the status quo of relations between education and work. It will be interesting to see how this effort proceeds in the future.

Igami's "Reform of University Education for Non-Elite University Students" provides wide-ranging insights into the status of non-elite universities and students, a topic that has thus far not been presented sufficiently to an international audience. The article describes various programs that universities are currently implementing. With the percentage of students advancing to higher education on the rise, as described above, there is an increasing number of new types of students, with traits previously unheard of at Japanese universities. To put it bluntly, the key challenges facing this new category of students lie in lower levels of academic aptitude, ambition, and communicative ability. A large number of institutions are already offering remedial learning programs. According to Igami, the important point is for students to get a foundation that will help them relearn core material and be hired by a reputable employer, if not a prestigious one, in the future, as well as the general, universal academic fundamentals and knowledge needed to succeed in the labor market. The article states that such programs are helping to widen the range of career choices for non-elite students.

This *JLR* special feature focuses, from various angles, on the transition from school to work as experienced by Japanese university graduates. This process is changing, and a decade from now is likely to be quite different from today in a variety of aspects. The topic of young people's transition from the classroom to the workplace is one of universal and timeless import, and one that *JLR* will continue to address from time to time as the situation evolves.

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