

Education at Universities Before Employment

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Abstract

In the circumstances where the unemployment rate among young people almost reaches 10%, universities should reconsider their roles. This research note analyzes the current situation of the new graduates' job search and discusses what the university students should learn during the four years before entering into society. It does not necessarily advise only to adapt to the employers' requirements but shows a variety of possibilities of the students' future and tries to connect the contents to what students should learn while they are students. The contents include ways to protect the student's working life, to be more employable, to be a good citizen, and to make his/her mind rich.

Key Words: new graduates, new employees, education, training, minds, protect, employable, good citizen, language, computer

I. Introduction — Employment Situation of University Graduates

The unemployment rate of Japan is 4.1% as of February 2006. The rate is higher among younger people; 9.5% for males and 6.3% for females ages 15 to 24 (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, February 2006.) The employment situation for university graduates depends on the economic situation every year. Graduates of 2007 will be more welcomed in labor markets with economic recovery, yet the situation is extremely worse compared to the days when most of the new graduates worked as regular full-time employees. The rate of full-time workers has decreased every year. The percentage of part-time workers of people under 19 years old is the highest, 53.6% (47.2% for males/57.9% for females) compared with other age groups. The figure is much smaller for the age group of 20 to 29 which is 18.3% (10.0% for males/24.7% for females (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2006.) However more graduates will leave their first jobs in earlier stages of their career which will be explained in Chapter III.

The working environment has become worse. The over-work death is a very critical issue in Japanese society. 816 cases were reported in 2004, increased from 493 in 1999 (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2005A; 296, 2004; 194.) The full-time employees have to work in order to make up for the hours when part-time employees take holidays without notice. As the companies cut the labor cost, there are not enough employees to do particular jobs. The students prior work experience such as part-time workers at convenience stores, fast food restaurants, family restaurants, coffee shops, etc., which make them hesitate to continue working after graduation at the same place or at the same industry where they work as students.

The cases of work related mental illness increased from 155 in 1999 to 524 in 2004 (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2005A; 296, 2004; 194.) The suicide rate in Japan

sharply increased from 1997 to 1998 (24,391 to 32,863) (National Police Agency, 2005; Annex Table 5) just after successive bankruptcy of the large financial firms and from 2002 to 2003 (32,143 to 34,427) (National Police Agency, 2005; Annex Table 5) after the new Prime Minister Koizumi announced successive decontrol laws. In particular, the suicide rate of people between the ages of 20 to 40 years old had the largest increase (69.6%) much more than those in the age of 50s' (4.5%) (Honkawa, 2006). The incidents decreased in 2004 (34,427 to 32,325) (National Police Agency, 2005; Annex Table 5). No analysis has been made for this decline. It is true still today in 2006, the railway commuters between the suburbs and the center of Tokyo cannot spend a week without hearing an announcement of the train delay because of a suicide jump from the platform to the tracks. Sometimes they hear such announcements twice a day.

The universities and the students are nervous about job seeking activities. The universities are evaluated by the employment rate of their graduates. The students might not be employed as regular employees. Some may not start seeking jobs.

This research note discusses what the students should learn during the four years before entering into the society. It does not necessarily suggest only adapting to the employers' requirements but shows a variety of possibilities of the students' future and tries to connect to the contents what the students should learn while they are students. The contents include protecting the student's working life, being more employable, being a good citizen, and making his/her life rich.

Data by government related agencies was used along with Web pages on company recruitment for this research. Other main sources for discussion are the students the author sees and talks in the campus.

II. Requirement of Employers

More Japanese companies have become to expect new graduates to be fully ready to work.

A very recent survey by Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry called "Urgent Survey on Basics for Members of Society" explains that while employers require "independence", "power of action", and "creativity" for young employees, young employees do not have enough independence or problem solving skills. Large gap between employers and young employees is seen in "working on others", "problem solving", and "stress control". This survey also discloses the difference of requirement by industry and by company size. The bigger companies require the "power to step forward" and the middle-small companies, "team-oriented work ability". The construction industry requires more "ability of working in teams", service industry, "the power to step forward", and manufacturing, "the power to continue thinking" (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2006).

The companies display their requirements for new employees on their websites as "The Image of People We are Seeking." The following are some examples;

Matsushita Electric Works;

Tough, challenging, and unique

(<http://www.mew.co.jp/corp/saiyo/info/i03.html>, 2006).

Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., Ltd.;

Customer-oriented, entrepreneurship, independence

(http://www.panasonic.co.jp/jobs/new_gra/personnel/index.html, 2006)

Fuji Heavy Industries, Ltd.;

Innovative, Individual, and Courageous
 (<http://www.fhi.co.jp/jinnji/guide/recruit/recruitinfo/thoughtsus.html>, 2006)
 Mazda Motor Corporation;
 “Super” with Independence, and Understanding and Advancing Multi-Value
 (<http://www.mazda-co.jp/recruit/message/person/html>, 2006)

III. Current Education at Companies for New Employees

The most recent and detailed official statistics on education in Japanese companies was published in 1999. Education style was a mixture of Off-JT and self-learning for the employees of any level. 55.5% of new employees attended Off-JT and 54.9% of new employees did study by themselves. More employees in larger companies attended Off-JT, 65.4% in the companies with more than 1000 employees vs. 44.2% in the companies with 30 to 99 employees (Ministry of Labour, 1999).

Although Japanese companies used to employ Off-JT for new employees, they have replaced them with self-learning. An example is the author’s research on Japanese and U.S. auto companies in 1990 and 1996. In 1996 more companies (0 to 5 out of 7) employed self-learning for educating employees for foreign assignment (Mochimaru, 1996).

The 2004 report of HRD Basic Research Results reports that 29.0% of employees received Off-JT and 36.5% of them did self-learning in 2004 FY. This report also mentions that the employees aged 24 or younger received 107.2 hours-Off-JT evenly (Ministry of Labour, Health and Welfare, 2005B).

In 2006, companies tend to strengthen education for new employees and to extend the duration of their training, probably because of the economic recovery and by global competition.

[Duration]

Duration is varied from within one week to six months. About 20% each answered “within one week”, “two to three weeks”, “about one month”, and “two to three months.” About 10% answered “more than 6 months” and “no education or training.” Out of them, 95% claim the necessity of training for new employees (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, April 17, 2006). The duration was extended from one week to three months at NTT Communications and from two weeks to two months at Fujitsu. The globalization also makes KOMATSU to employ ten-day intensive English training (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, April 4, 2006).

[Programs]

The programs recommended for the new employees are, from the top, manner as adult (82%), special knowledge useful at work (60%), company history and business (50%), knowledge of finance and of marketing (40%), compliance (38%), training at factory (36%), PC skill (30%), and communication with senior employees (28%) (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, April 17, 2006).

The Japanese Institute of Labour Policy and Training offers a model program for new graduates of junior colleges or of universities as follows;

Two-day Program

1. Purpose of Training

- To become company employees/organization persons
2. Management Environment
 3. What is a Company?
Company management and organization system
 4. Jobs at Companies
Goal/plan/Complete job accomplishment
 5. How to Proceed Jobs
Job cycle
Efficient job pursuit
Report/Communication/Consultation
 6. Communication in the Workplace
With colleagues/With seniors/With bosses
 7. Manners in the Workplace
Language/Servicing Manner/Name card exchange
 8. My Goals

This is a model training required to any employee.

There are also programs required to particular jobs/industries. Such programs will be offered at each company or at each industry.

IV. Current Education at Universities

Regarding work after graduation, it is criticized that the universities have not responded to the knowledge or skills for working. Also, it has been alleged that university graduates are not even mentally ready to work. However, the universities have taken many steps to improve the employability of their students. There are mainly two choices of the working places for the university graduates; to become employees or to become employers.

Only a few of them would become employers, although so-called venture-boom is high. The rate of starting companies in Japan has decreased from 5.9% in 1970's to 3.1% in early 2000 (The Small and Medium Enterprise Agency, 2004; Table 12).

Most of the students are to be employed. In 2005, 93.5% of new university graduates were employed. To respond to the employers' claims on new graduates' behavior which do not adapt to working life and to about 30% resignation rate among male graduates within eight to ten years after being first employed (The Japan Institute of Labour, 1999), universities have employed internship programs where the students can experience the real working world. About 59.0% of the universities carried out the internship programs in 2004 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports, and Technology, 2005). The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training reports the details of the internship programs in its report No. 11 in 2004 (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2004). Although the word, "internship" sounds new, the students of engineering departments already started working in factories as a required subject during summer vacation since the 1960's according to a professor of Tokyo Institute of Technology. The difference with it is the "new" internship programs are various departments have adopted them and it is an elective.

Another measure the universities have taken to make their students employable is to provide more opportunities to the students to get various certificates. The certificates are classified into two; curriculum dependent and independent. The former is further classified into three; obtainable with graduation, by passing national exams, and by some work ex-

perience.

The certificates obtainable with graduation are strongly related to each department and are various licenses authorized by government such as teachers, librarians, museum curators, child-care specialists, dietitians, licensed nursing care workers, registered surveyors, etc. The teachers are actually employed by passing the exams of each local government. The ones requiring national exams are nurses, public health nurses, midwives, clinical technologists, clinical mechanics, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech and hearing therapists, medical radiologist, medical doctors, veterinarians, managed-dietitians, welfare workers, psycho-health care workers, ocean technicians, Level A handlers of dangerous objects, etc. There are some certificates that some subjects of the exams are exempted with some units of the equivalent subjects. They are Level A general wireless telecommunication operators, Level A ground telecommunication technologists, licensed tax accountant, etc. The certificates requiring some years of working experience in the field is first-level qualified architects (Obunsha, 2005).

The universities also provide special courses for the curriculum independent certificates. The students will usually pay additional fee for the courses. They are the certificates related to language ability especially English, to accounting, to information technology, to sales ability, and many others.

The students are eager to get those certificates to be in a better position when they start seeking jobs.

V. What Should be Taught at Universities?

It is not the universities sole responsibility to produce corporate employees. Some of the graduates may become artists, teachers, employers, novelists, etc., and after their working-life there maybe ten to twenty years of retirement waiting for them. What to teach at the universities should be considered from the viewpoint of employers' requirement first and second for the sake of the graduates. This paper presents one student with five capabilities as follows; to adapt to employers' requirement, to protect themselves at working life, to be more employable, to be a good citizen, and to make their minds rich.

1. *To adapt to employers' requirement*

The "independence", "power of action", and "creativity", the major requirements of the employers appeared in the urgent survey (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2006) as stated in Section II do not adapt to the current education and training for new employees, which means the requirements cannot be accomplished in such a short period of training. That is, the education required of the students is, indeed, the education that the universities should and can offer. That survey members of METI are advancing to the next step toward what should be offered before employment will include the education at universities. The results will be reported in the near future.

Here the discussion will proceed from the point of an educator at university.

Also as stated in Section II, the requirements are different by the size and the industry.

The bigger companies require the "power to step forward" and the middle-small companies, team-oriented work ability.

The construction industry requires more ability of working in teams, the service industry, the power to step forward, and manufacturing, the power to continue thinking (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2006).

The students usually start seeking a job at the end of their sophomore year. By then, the students do not have a detailed idea on working after graduation. Most of them do not care about particular company or even industry. Then how can they choose the subjects useful to be employed in their first three years at universities? Yet it is not each subject alone that gives the skills employers require. It would be built by learning sincerely and studying hard and by working as a member of a circle, a sport team, or of a seminar.

2. *To ensure themselves of a working life*

The Japanese have long given up measures to stand up to protect themselves from the powers who tried to get rid of the rights of laborers. The last such measure was the strike to get the right to strike by Japan Railway labors in 1975. The government, media and the users as consumers were all against the strike. After that, the strike as one of the measures to protect the labors was detested by ordinary Japanese and has lost power in Japan (Shiraishi and Ohno, 2005, pp. 97–98). However the Japanese society might need the measure again since the working environment has become worse with the expanding gap of the living standard among the people.

Especially younger people should know the laws to protect their lives as they tend to be used as just cheap laborers. For example, a university is certified to give the students the certificates of *Eisei Kanrisha* (Hygiene Administrator) by providing a course for the certificate which is a must for a firm with more than 50 employees (Nippon Sports Science University, 2006). The course is not only necessary to get the certificate but also useful to give specific knowledge to students to protect themselves both as part-time workers while they are students and as employees after graduation.

3. *To be more employable*

As stated often, the abilities the employers require vary. In the first section of this chapter, the basics for members of society were discussed.

Practically, to be more employable, the skills should be discussed. In the current situation, PC technology and language ability would vary the choices of the students in the time of job seeking. The computers for communication and for information gathering are indispensable in the working fields. The most usable language has been English language with international dialects. In addition, for the companies, small, middle or large, global business expansion has required other language ability such as Chinese language.

Overseas experience is also valuable. The new employees might soon be sent to overseas business trip in this globalization age. It would be a big difference if you have ever left from the airport through immigration or not. Overseas experience during university would lessen the pressure on their first overseas business trip. The companies would also expect the new employees with short or long periods of overseas experience.

The students should be more encouraged to have computer technology and language ability. English language plus one more, especially Chinese language would widen the students' choices. If they are not ready to arrange overseas tours by themselves, it may be a good idea that the university would arrange some tours including company visits for the students.

4. *To be a good citizen*

Both employees or employers are citizens with rights and responsibilities for their society they belong to. To be a good citizen the students should know some rules in the society.

They would then study the Japanese constitution and other laws. Currently most of the

universities include the constitution as an optional subject. This should be compulsory. To learn the constitution is also useful for the students in order to prepare the days they will explain about Japan over global business as a good world citizen.

5. *To make their minds rich*

The four years at universities are in their youth of most students before employment. That is the only period when the university students have more free time until the age of retirement. They will work about 40 years after graduation. It would be a good opportunity to make their long working life rich mentally. The liberal arts should be more emphasized to take for the rich minds.

VI. Conclusion

It is easy to mistakenly imagine what should be talked from the title of this paper “Education at Universities before Employment”. Almost everyday the news media reports the ways on how to respond to lazy young people who do not start working after graduation. The people might expect the universities to give some skills to be employed somewhere.

This paper, however, presented one student with five capabilities for the future.

To adapt to employers’ requirement, “the Basics for Members of Society” explains that employers require “independence”, “power of action”, and “creativity” for young employees. Each company has its own image of the ideal employee that is sometimes appealed in the company web site.

In more positive meaning, the universities should give computer and language ability and overseas experience. These skills and experience would make the students more employable.

To protect themselves during their working life is also important in this age of an unstable working environment. The universities should give knowledge on labour laws to the students.

To develop a good citizen is also an important mission of the universities. The universities should give Japanese constitution as compulsory subject.

To make their minds rich, liberal arts should be reevaluated.

There are limited ways that the University curriculum can help their students find better job seeking opportunities. In the end the students should find their ways by themselves.

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