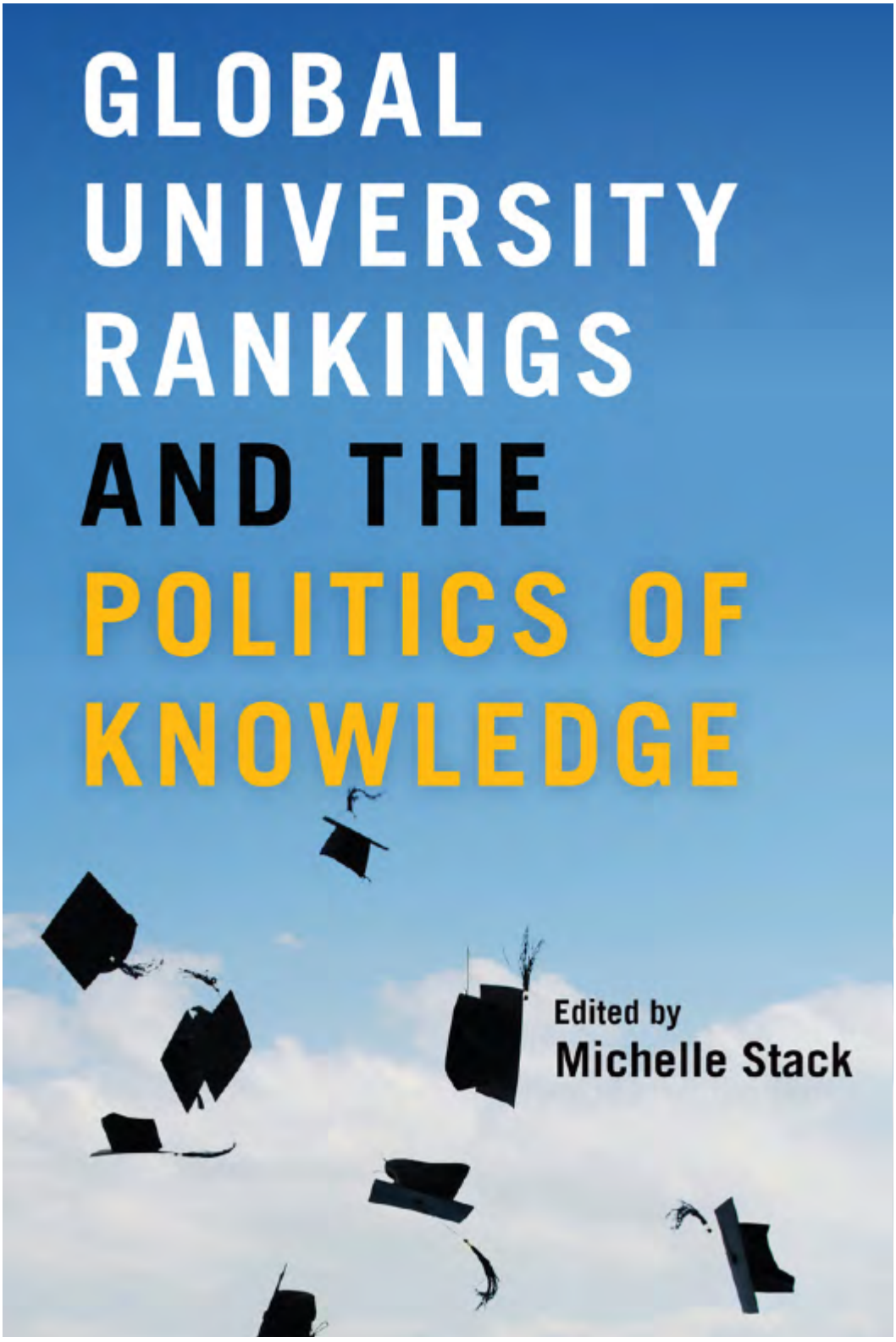
GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE



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7 Between Local Distinction and Global Reputation: University Rankings and Changing Employment in Japan

MAYUMI ISHIKAWA

This chapter examines the conundrum posed by the popularity of global university rankings and the proliferation of the excellence norms that they promote by examining their incompatibility with the traditional domestic university hierarchy of Japan. Previous studies have identified the delayed internationalization and slow Anglophonization of research and education as factors responsible for the deteriorating performance of Japanese universities in recent years. A culture of "conservatism" and "lack of ambition" among research universities is blamed for the declining rankings. This study sets itself apart from such a culturally essentialist approach and addresses the broader socio-economic factors surrounding university reputation and employment in Japan today. By doing so, it offers another look at the challenges that globalization poses to Japanese higher education and the society at large, specifically, that of constructing a global reputation versus the deconstructing (or eroding) domestic reputation.

Japan's domestic university hierarchy, maintained throughout much of the postwar period, is based largely on exam selectivity of students and the prioritization of producing desirable graduates for the domestic labour market. Although this local system is badly in need of adjustment amid the changing economic climate and labour market practices under globalization, embracing global university rankings at the expense of the domestic system of assigning status can be destructive to employment and career systems that have defined the lives of Japan's middle-class, white-collar workers for decades. The study thus addresses the significant impact and threat that global university rankings may present to the career and life trajectories of individuals in a "periphery" nation on the global higher education map.

Previous studies on global university rankings have been conducted from "institutional" and "national" perspectives, such as those seeking policy solutions to enhance the competitiveness of flagship institutions, or those on talent wars and the implications for the knowledge economy. This study, however, ultimately questions the impact that the prevalence of global excellence norms

showcased in world university rankings may have within the context of corporations expanding borderless operations and the global restructuring of national labour markets.

The "Decline" of Ranking Positions and Japanese Universities under Attack

Despite the intense interest and attention to global rankings expressed from national stakeholders (Yonezawa, 2010, p. 122), the overall performance of Japanese universities has declined in recent years. The downward trend is especially notable when compared with the bourgeoning rankings of universities among Asian neighbours such as China. For example, Japan consistently led Asia in the Academic Rankings of World Universities (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University until 2015, with seven to nine institutions listed in the top 200. Today, twelve Chinese universities are listed in the top 200 while only seven Japanese universities remain in the same ranking at all, with a majority positioned near the bottom (ARWU, 2015a, 2015b, 2018a, 2018b). Japan's government, which had been ambivalent towards global university rankings due to its inability to sustain financial commitments to uplift positions of domestic universities in the climate of fiscal austerity (Yonezawa, 2010, p. 125), was alarmed by the trend and has since embraced global rankings as national key performance indicators to evaluate domestic universities (Ishikawa, 2014). Subsequently, highly selective, large-scale funding schemes such as the "Top Global University" project has been introduced to boost international competitiveness or, more explicitly, the ranking positions of Japanese universities (Ishikawa & Sun, 2016, pp. 465–6).

Previous studies and criticisms from stakeholders have identified two major factors considered responsible for, or at least related to, the downward trend in the global rankings of Japanese universities. These are (1) a delay in "internationalization" and (2) a lack of "citation" of Japanese academics in international publications (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan [MEXT], 2013).[1] Various stakeholders – including policymakers, business leaders, and those within domestic higher education – point, first and foremost, to delayed and ineffective internationalization of Japanese universities (see, for example, Ishikawa, 2014, p. 6; Yonezawa, 2010; also see Mock et al., 2016). "Internationalization" is typically measured in global university rankings by indicators such as the percentage of international students and faculty, areas in which Japanese universities are reported particularly "weak" (Yonezawa, 2010, p. 127). Japanese universities are said to be dragging behind in rankings due to their failure to internationalize with measures such as promoting the widespread usage of English to diversify student and staff bodies and create international campus environments.

A lack of "citation" is related to the production of academic knowledge and connected to the delay in internationalization. Japanese universities have delayed shifting their faculties' publication language to English, which would enhance global engagements in research and, by extension, boost research publication and citation scores in university rankings. Significant proportions of research outcomes in the humanities and social sciences and important segments of "hard science" research in Japan are published in the Japanese language. Therefore, the "narrowly Anglo-American" (Paasi, 2005) English-language publication data used in global rankings omits a significant amount of Japan's academic research and is thus unfit to accurately assess the performance of scholars in Japan (Ishikawa, 2014; Ishikawa & Sun, 2016). To boost the ranking positions of Japanese universities as the government instructs, however, it is imperative for Japanese research universities to publish more in English in indexed international journals, particularly in areas conventionally undertaken in the national language.

The pursuit of higher positions in rankings by "producing" and "gaming" (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Shore & Wright, 2015, p. 26) may not only compromise responsibilities to local readership but also be detrimental in fostering innovation and creativity in scientific research (see, for example, Ishikawa, 2014, n. 9). In the areas of both internationalization and citation, Japanese universities are criticized for being plagued with conservatism (Goodman, 2016, p. viii) and a "lack of ambition" (JSPS, 2011, p. 2) in the age of global ratings and position-taking.

This Study: University Hierarchy and Employment

This study addresses a third factor contributing to Japan's declining ratings: the incompatibility of global ranking systems with Japan's domestic university hierarchy, which is based mainly on exam selectivity of students and prioritizing producing desirable graduates for the labour market. As the prestige of a particular university has been inextricably linked to graduates' employment prospects and the associated lifetime security and rewards, replacing the domestic with global reputational hierarchy could upset the existing social stratification mechanism that has defined the lives of white-collar university graduates in much of postwar Japan. This chapter focuses on the "potential threat to the conventional university entrance and exit points of *juken* [taking entrance exams] and *shushoku* [job search and placement]" (Breaden, 2013, p. 183).

The analysis hereafter thus goes beyond the realm of higher education and addresses the broader socio-economic factors surrounding university reputation and employment in Japan. By doing so, this study offers another look at globalization challenges to Japanese higher education and the society at large and, specifically, the dilemma of eroding domestic reputation in order to

construct a global reputation. The study contends that Japanese universities' delay or wariness in adhering to the norms of global rankings is not necessarily due to cultural conservatism or lack of ambition, but rather, because of the embeddedness of the domestic university hierarchy in the nation's labour market and the risks of replacing the national system of prestige with global rankings. Embracing global rankings, as policymakers now encourage, may have significant impacts on the well-being of individuals beyond institutional and national policy aspirations and competitions.

Scholarly work on global university rankings rarely pays attention to the relationship between university rankings and career and employment, even though university reputation does matter for the employment and career prospects of graduates in many national contexts. A recent study from the United States, for instance, presents compelling evidence that graduates of elite universities monopolize high-paying jobs (Rivera, 2015). Also, university hierarchy and reputation, of which university rankings are a powerful indicator, influence class formation and the transmission of privilege from one generation to the next (cf. Karabel, 2005; Soares, 2007).

With the exception of a small number of studies (see, for example, Hazelkorn, 2015, pp. 159–62), social analyses of global university rankings tend to be university-centred (see Altbach & Balán, 2007; Yudkevich et al., 2016), and often written from the perspective of an institution's or state's competitiveness rather than that of individual stakeholders. This study from Japan is intended to close this research gap, attempting to show the impacts that global university rankings may have on white-collar jobs as corporations enhance borderless operations and national labour markets are subjected to global restructuring (cf. Brown et al., 2008).

The following case study[2] begins with a description of how the postwar norm of university hierarchy and a system of meritocracy are constructed in Japan. This is followed by an analysis of the increased importance of enrolment at elite domestic universities due to demographic changes and the universalization of higher education. It then discusses the advantages that prestigious universities offer graduates at critical moments of recruitment and promotion at leading corporations. The analysis reveals the high stakes of entrance into four-year undergraduate programs at prestigious universities, as it brings long-term security and better lifetime earnings to Japan's white-collar workers. Furthermore, signs of fundamental change afoot in the labour market, due mostly to globalization, and the implications of such changes for local and global university hierarchies are discussed. Although the conditions are emergent and fluid, the final section discusses the rising prominence of global rankings vis-à-vis domestic university hierarchy and their potential impacts to individual employment, remunerations, promotion prospects, and upward social mobility in Japan – a periphery nation on the global higher education map.

Japan's Postwar University Hierarchy and Intensification of "Which Institution" Competition

Japan has had a hierarchy of universities since the establishment of Western-modelled modern universities in the late nineteenth century. While the status of a university carries significance in both social and economic senses, a university's prestige is not determined by factors such as its long history and traditions, location, the social class of the students, or the faculty's research capacity (Amano, 1997, p. 56). Rather, universities in Japan are ranked according to the entrance exam scores of incoming students. When an increased number of students from broader social strata started to pursue higher education during the postwar period, competition among high school students to pass university entrance examinations heated up. Ronald Dore (1976/1997) once referred to Japan's pyramid-shaped hierarchy, with Tokyo University at the top, as a system based on "enormously elaborated, very expensive intelligence testing" (pp. 48–9). Amano (1997) further noted that what mattered most in Japanese society was "which institution" rather than "what level" (of education) (pp. 56–7). Fierce university exam competition to enter prestigious universities, or "diploma disease," has been the subject of much criticism since the 1970s for being counterproductive to fostering individual creativity (Dore, 1976/1997).

Nevertheless, not only has the basic principle of using exam performance as a means of acquiring social status and prestige remained, but access to prestigious universities has become more important socially and economically during the past decades due to expanded enrolment or universalization of higher education.

University and junior college enrolment expanded rapidly between 1960 and 1975, jumping from 10 to 40 per cent of high school graduates. By about 2005, rates stood at approximately 50 per cent of all students (MEXT, 2017). With the growth in demand, the number of universities and junior colleges increased more than threefold during the past fifty years, from 245 in 1955 to 778 in 2010 (MEXT, 2016). The increasing number of seats coupled with declining birth rates and a shrinking youth population have caused the total entrance capacity of Japan's universities to exceed the total number of applicants or prospective students. By 2010, Japanese higher education had thus reached the *zen'nyu* (or "all in") stage. In other words, as long as they do not choose the "best" schools or stick to a particular area of study, any students can now enter university.

With the arrival of the "all in" era, the relative worth, or "premium," of a university diploma is destined to decline (Tachibanaki, 2010, pp. 33–4). In Japan, the increasing rates of tertiary education attainment (and the decreased competitiveness to get into university) did not translate into pressure to attain more

advanced degrees, as it did in many other countries. In Germany, for example, where the "massification of higher education" and degree inflation have proceeded under the Bologna Process and standardization of tertiary qualifications, a bachelor's degree has reportedly become "an all-round qualification that enables its holder to work at a mid-level position on a mid-level income" (Münch, 2010, p. 3). Consequently, the competition to enter master's degree programs has intensified, Münch (2010) argues, as in the case of the United States (p. 3).

In contrast, in Japan, rather than the vertical competition to seek advanced degrees, the horizontal competition to attend a more "superior" university for an undergraduate degree has intensified (Yashiro, 2009, pp. 148–9). In other words, what Amano (1997, p. 57) previously called a "which institution" credential competition has paradoxically intensified. Meanwhile, the pursuit of postgraduate degrees has remained unpopular in Japan except in science and engineering disciplines, where a master's degree is considered a basic attainment and a prerequisite to be hired as a professional.

A recent MEXT study of degree attainment in seven countries (China, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, the UK, and the US) shows that only in Japan has the number of graduate degree recipients stagnated or even declined over the past decade; all other countries show a clear sign of increase (National Institute of Science and Technology Policy [NISTEP], 2018, 125). The widely accepted notion that graduate degrees do not provide a return on investment persists in Japan, despite recent studies that indicate otherwise (see, for example, Kakizawa et al., 2014; Morikawa, 2013).

The MEXT report even hints at the possibility that young generations in Japan remain underqualified compared to their peers with advanced degrees in other economies. Japan's rather idiosyncratic intensification of horizontal competition for enrolment in the nation's best universities, against the global trend of vertical competition for advanced degrees, needs to be understood in the context of the nation's labour market and the significance of university reputation to social stratification.

Elite Universities and Corporate Jobs

Although Japan's earnings premium indicator for tertiary education (152) as opposed to upper and post-secondary education is relatively modest – and lower than the OECD average of 156 (OECD, 2017, p. 104) – graduates of elite universities enjoy a much bigger premium. Leading universities offer brighter prospects for employment at major companies that are considered to offer higher salaries, employment security, and benefits (Lechevalier & Nanta, 2014, p. 108; Tachibanaki, 2010, pp. 18–20).

Japanese firms recruit employees for managerial positions directly from universities; they therefore "comprise an entering cohort that is homogeneous in age and in education" (Spilerman & Ishida, 1995, p. 7). Major corporations used to recruit only from select institutions, a practice criticized as discriminatory from the 1970s and largely discontinued by the 1990s (Amano, 1997, p. 57; Tachibanaki, 2010, p. 19). Even after companies switched to an "open-door" recruitment process, it is widely believed that privileges, if not outright favours, are still distributed. The advantage of attending an elite university does not just apply to acquiring a job, however. According to economist Toshiaki Tachibanaki, graduates of prestigious universities have greater chances of promotion in listed companies in Japan as well, and thus of higher lifetime earnings (Tachibanaki, 2010, pp. 12–21).

Using alma mater information of the presidents and executives of leading Japanese corporations published in a local business magazine in 2009 as an example, Tachibanaki traces the graduates of "brand universities."[3] Graduates from the seven former imperial (currently national) universities (the Universities of Hokkaido, Kyoto, Kyushu, Nagoya, Tohoku, Tokyo, and Osaka), Hitotsubashi University, and the leading private universities (Waseda and Keio) are more likely to be promoted to the ranks of senior management or leadership in Japan. Among these, graduates of the universities of Hitotsubashi, Kyoto, Tokyo, and Keio are far more likely to become company presidents and executives than graduates of other universities (Tachibanaki, 2010, pp. 12–19). Such positions are a compelling indicator of success; both men and women in managerial and senior management positions receive an additional ¥3 million to ¥5 million in annual income compared to those in non-managerial positions (Tachibanaki, 2010, p. 10; see also Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2017). Earnings beyond retirement age may also be affected, as better positions tend to lead to post-retirement positions in affiliated companies (Yashiro, 2011, pp. 139–40). Note that no names of foreign universities are listed, either as an individual institution or as a compilation of all institutions overseas.

Competition is fierce for better positions with higher wages within corporations and in government. Employers positively rate graduates of elite universities; their success on the university entrance exam is considered an indication of the drive, intellectual capacity, and potential for "absorbing the firms' on-the-job training" (Yashiro, 2011, p. 148). Also, graduates of elite universities often benefit from university alumni connections within corporations; bosses tend to treat their juniors who graduated from the same university well and may even give them preferential "sunny side" positions with better prospects for promotion (Tachibanaki, 2010, pp. 18–19). Employers also benefit from such connections: those who graduate from elite universities are considered useful in cultivating ties with high-ranking government officials through common membership in alumni associations (see, for example, Mori, 2004).

The relationship between which university one attends and one's job, promotion, and wages is not so black and white as the above suggests, however (see Takeuchi's [1995/2016] detailed study about Japan's meritocracy, promotion, and layers of intra-company competition). While graduates of elite universities may have higher chances of promotion, by no means do they monopolize executive jobs.[4] It is important to note the influence that business magazine articles about executives and their universities have on mostly white-collar readers and their families. Each time national newspapers publish the latest appointment information of new CEOs and presidents of major corporations, their short CVs typically include the name of the university from which they graduated. The public is thus habitually reminded of elite schools that produce influential business leaders of the past, the present, and perhaps the future.

There is no denying, however, that Japan's labour market constitutes a "matrix of inequalities" (Lechevalier, 2014, p. 96). Since the 1990s, Japan has departed from its earlier model of an egalitarian society. The growing social inequality in Japan from the 1990s to the twenty-first century – widely noted and studied by social scientists (see, for example, Kariya, 2010; Kikkawa, 2006; Lechevalier & Nanta, 2014; Moriguchi, 2017; Moriguchi & Saez, 2008; and Shirahase, 2014) – was induced not by technological advancement, changing labour institutions, and globalization, like in other economies, but rather by wage differentials, employment opportunities, and job security (Lechevalier, 2014, pp. 95–8; see also Moriguchi, 2017; Moriguchi & Saez, 2008). This inequality matrix is, as seen above, heavily influenced by one's alma mater.

Globalization, Changing Labour Recruitment Practices, and Universities

By the year 2010, when the poor performance of Japanese universities in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings made national headlines, Japan's labour market was already exhibiting some signs of fundamental changes. These were due mostly to globalizing business operations. This section will outline the ongoing changes in the domestic labour market and how such changes may affect the conventional university hierarchy. The three changes outlined below all relate to the recruitment of new college graduates by employers.

First, the practice of searching for and hiring non-Japanese employees, or so-called "global human resources," from both within and outside of Japan has been spreading. In 2010 – the same year Japan's universities fell in global ranking positions – Japanese corporations announced new initiatives to hire more non-Japanese beginning in the spring of 2011. This marked the beginning of outsourcing domestic jobs previously reserved for candidates within the country.

Several articles appeared in leading national dailies quoting major corporations announcing that they would be hiring new workers from overseas and in some cases would establish offshore recruiting offices. Panasonic Corporation, one of Japan's largest recruiters of new college graduates, announced its plan to allocate 80 per cent (1,100 of 1,390) of its spring 2011 job openings to overseas candidates (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2010), while reducing domestic recruits by 40 per cent (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 2010). Other significant recruiters, such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Group and Toyo Engineering Corporation, followed suit (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 2010). Unlike previous foreign recruits, most of whom were posted in manufacturing and worked in overseas branch offices, new overseas recruits were said to become key technical and design personnel and were expected to become part of the management in the near future.

These outsourcing moves occurred years earlier in some neighbouring Asian countries but were new to Japan. Today, recruiting staff from overseas has become commonplace and ceases to make headlines. By 2015, just over 37 per cent of 2,138 Japanese corporations surveyed had already recruited international staff, including graduates from institutions overseas and foreign students in Japan (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 2015).[5]

Second, concurrent to the change in *who* was recruited for available jobs, corporations are increasingly recognizing the impracticality of *when* new hires are recruited. Traditionally, new employees began working on 1 April in Japan, immediately upon graduation from college. As part of the drive to attract "global talent," however, recruiters now offer interview opportunities between June and August to hire Japanese students who study abroad and therefore miss the early spring job-hunting season. These recruits are hired along with mostly non-Japanese candidates and begin working between July and October, rather than waiting until April of the following year, which was the previous practice (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 2015). The adjustment reflects the increasing competition in the global as well as the local markets for high-skilled jobs.

Finally, recent challenges to the norm of equal pay for all new entrants in the Japanese labour market indicate another significant change on the horizon. In the fall of 2017, Huawei Technologies, a Chinese ICT firm, offered a monthly salary of ¥400,000 for prospective bachelor's degree holders in science and engineering; this was double the standard starting salary offered by Japanese companies (*Nikkei Asian Review*, 2017). Huawei was reportedly seeking Japanese technology graduates to work in its new research lab near Tokyo, who would be compensated according to the "global standard" (*Nikkei Asian Review*, 2017).[6] Not only did this episode receive attention among prospective graduates and recruiters. It was seen as a challenge to the long-term practices of seniority-based wages and employment security, the two pillars of Japanese postwar employment.

Under the conventional two pillars, a regular, full-time employee of a private Japanese corporation or the public sector enjoys job security until retirement age. The trade-off of this security is a "work now, get paid later" salary system in which young workers are paid less than their contribution to the firm and are compensated through higher wages in their middle age and a large lump-sum retirement benefit (Yashiro, 2011, pp. 136–8). While seniority-based wages are not unique to Japan, the wage gap between senior and junior workers in Japan is significantly higher than in countries such as Germany, France, and the UK (Yashiro, 2011, pp. 136–7). Thus, chances are that young workers employed by Japanese corporations initially earn less than their counterparts in other advanced economies or, in this case, China.

Old labour practices, specific to most Japanese corporations, might have worked well during periods of steady economic growth. For young workers today, however, the "paid later" model is increasingly unattractive and implausible when information technology and technological innovation such as artificial intelligence (AI) are continually changing labour requirements and are expected to reduce jobs. In addition, international mergers and acquisitions deals and global management teams are already changing the Japanese corporate landscape. Good old Japanese employment practices can wither sooner than one expects.

Impacts of Globalization on the Labour Market

Despite ongoing changes in the labour market, Japan's white-collar employees continue to be recruited directly from universities and still compose an entering cohort that is homogeneous in age and education qualifications. A degree from a prestigious domestic university is still believed to bestow on its graduates a ticket to success at the critical point of entering the labour market and in subsequent promotion opportunities. The worrisome trend of outsourcing jobs, that is, allocating more positions to international rather than domestic graduates, has not yet invited voices of protest or translated into antagonism from domestic stakeholders, mainly students and families.

The impacts of the recent changes in the labour market noted above have been downplayed, primarily due to improving labour prospects for new graduates after a prolonged period of contraction in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the Great Eastern Earthquake and Tsunami that hit the northern region of Japan in 2011.[7] Employment conditions improved considerably after 2010, judging from various public and private statistics (see, for example, Japanese Institute for Labour Policy and Training [JILPT], 2020; Recruit Works, 2019). Since 2012, the job offers-to-seekers ratio for new college graduates has continued to rise and reached 1.88 for the spring of 2019 (Recruit Works, 2019).

Although Japanese corporations are developing new hiring practices, the conventional path for new graduates to search for a job remains. Despite the expansion of international human resource recruitment for Japanese corporations' white-collar jobs, domestic job seekers have yet to be seriously impacted by global competition. Hence, the local labour market has not been globalized; instead, there is now a "new track" to attract more international talent into the market. While the traffic is increasing on this side track, as long as the general labour market conditions remain good, it continues to receive little attention, if any.

Hence, two tracks of employee recruitment exist in parallel, with no sign of convergence.[8] However, new practices in the labour market will inevitably bring entrants from both tracks together in the same workplaces. International graduates are likely to demand wages commensurate with their specialized training and advanced degrees, resist the "paid later" salary structure, and compete for better positions and promotion opportunities with Japanese employees. Some will also bring the benefits of the global networks of elite, world-class universities to domestic corporations and expect compensation for doing so.

Although the two recruitment tracks remain separate, practices in the "side track" may already be affecting domestic recruitment practices in the main track. Recently, Hiroaki Nakanishi, chairman of the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren), publicly voiced doubts that Japan's rigid recruitment and employment practices were in the best interest of the country's new college graduates (Japan Business Federation, 2018). His comments surprised the public, as regulations concerning recruitment and employment had thus far been set forth by business associations such as Keidanren, which also monitors their implementation among major member corporations. Nakanishi was quite blunt, saying, "Conventional Japanese methods such as lifetime employment and simultaneous hiring of new graduates are gradually ceasing to function effectively." Instead, each company should practise its own recruitment policy at its discretion (Japan Business Federation, 2018). He then ordered the federation to fundamentally review its recruitment and employment policy rather than simply adjusting timetables and schedules as previous reviews had done.

Discussion and Conclusion

This final section revisits significant points of argument concerning Japan's system of university hierarchy and emerging changes surrounding the very labour market that has rationalized such a hierarchy. It aims to capture the salient features in the undercurrents of change as well as the contradictions that emerge when constructing university reputation amid both globalizing and conventional labour market practices.

First, Japan's university hierarchy and prestige system are badly in need of adjustment. This need comes not so much from the social and political pressure concerning global university rankings, but more is due to the structural incapacity to train graduates to meet the demands and realities of a globalizing world. The conventional practice that disproportionately emphasizes the entry point into university and into the labour market as determinants of success is outdated. Such practices discourage the continuation of studies and advancement to higher levels of inquiry, thus disadvantaging Japan in the post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, where science and technology are considered to hold the key to innovation and economic development. Emphasis on "points of entry" accords a skewed amount of benefit to those who succeed at the critical points of entering university and the job market: winners enjoy privileges that may last for their entire career or life, while losers may be disadvantaged for life without a second chance. Such inflexibility not only fosters conservatism, but it also inhibits inclusive study and work environments that accommodate diverse talent regardless of age, gender, and nationality.

In short, the need is inherent, and challenges are far greater and more urgent than a superficial pursuit of world-class fame through elevating Japan's world university rankings positions. However, no matter how outdated the current national system of university prestige seems, replacing it with the norms and standards of global rankings would be not only unfit for improving the quality of Japan's higher education and scholarship but also unconducive to solving the fundamental social challenges in the era of global engagements. Global university rankings simply are not tools to promote justice and equity, as they cannot reexamine existing privileges and increase merit-based opportunities regardless of one's alma mater. Instead, they may even promote "social exclusion" (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012).

Second, Japan's domestic university hierarchy has so far remained valid in the national community. It has yet to be "deconstructed" vis-à-vis the globally constructed rankings reputation regime because the domestic university hierarchy is inextricably linked to employment and career systems that have defined the lives of Japan's middle-class, white-collar workers. The stakes are too high for its demise. National hierarchy and the power of domestic elite schools have thus remained resilient to the pressures of globalization. As Japan shifts from an egalitarian middle-class society to one more stratified along class lines, any "potential threat" to the remaining security passage between conventional university entrance and exit points is a grave concern for white-collar employees and their families. Such concern perhaps is at the core of the "conservatism" discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Domestic universities, rather than their counterparts overseas, continue to provide a steady linkage from school to corporations. Domestic universities are reputed to produce students with the trainability, basic intellectual

capacity, and traits that continue to be appreciated and sought out by Japanese corporate recruiters. In this sense, the local hierarchy system is also more relevant to corporate needs than the rules of global university rankings, which primarily measure faculty research performance and international profiles of institutions.

Increasingly, however, the public is sensitive to signs that the prestige and ability of elite universities to bestow advantages to graduates may be eroding. Hence, the poorer performance of Japanese leading universities in global university rankings creates "much ado" (Yonezawa, 2010). The stakeholders' response reflects the public awareness that home-based university credentials are unlikely to continue to offer the kind of lifetime rewards taken for granted by the previous generations of Japanese corporate elites.

Such awareness is perhaps related to the third and final point. Major forces to alter the conventional university hierarchy in Japan are likely to originate from the labour market, rather than university campuses. The domestic labour market is increasingly incorporated into international, global labour markets, which are restructured and divided along global and national lines and principles. Japan's leading listed corporations have been discreetly offshoring jobs and recruiting more employees from overseas labour markets since 2010, cutting shares of domestic recruits. The upper echelon of the domestic labour market is fast globalizing, while practices of the local employment track remain unchanged, though surely shrinking in the long run.

As conditions are fluid and changes are emergent, this chapter intends to capture some of the contingencies rather than presenting empirically grounded evidence. There seems to be an imminent danger that one inflexible, outdated local system of prestige is replaced by another, namely the hegemonic "world-class" model prescribed by rankings organizations (Ishikawa, 2009). If this happens, domestic qualifications may also risk becoming subordinated to global excellence norms represented most typically by world-class rankings. This is likely to have a significant impact on the employment, remunerations, career-building and promotion prospects, and upward social mobility of individuals, as the domestic example from Japan showcases. Japan's case perhaps has relevance to other national contexts in the world.

Just as universities are expected to use their own agency to maximize their standing in the rankings, according to Susan Wright (2012), individuals are "responsible for creating their own CV, gaining the best credentials and outputs (or appearance of outputs) that count, which importantly includes the 'brand' of their university, marketing them and networking to gain access to an elite, globalised labour market" (p. 99). Global university rankings are basically "Harvard-ometers" (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015, p. 392) and measure how closely an institution resembles Ivy League universities such as Harvard. Their graduates possess the "world-leading" credentials already reported to monopolize

high-paying jobs in the US labour market (Rivera, 2015) and very likely far beyond the national borders.

Japan has built and maintained a highly autonomous higher education sector during the past century. Until now, domestic universities have been able to uphold an independent system of training faculty without requiring them to attend Western institutions to attain higher degrees or garner prestige (cf. Amano, 2009; Ishikawa & Sun, 2016, pp. 463–4). It also is a country that once boasted that it was an egalitarian society, in which 80 per cent of the population believed it was part of the middle class. That predominantly middle-class society was achieved thanks not only to the economic development, narrow wage differences, and standardized salary levels but also to universal education and democratization over the last century (cf. Amano, 1997, p. 53). Improved access to university education and globalization in the twenty-first century may as well bring about positive social changes. To this end, the existing hierarchy that monopolizes prestige and opportunities is better replaced with a system that ensures equity and openness towards global society, rather than a new global hierarchy based on rankings.

NOTES

1 There is no doubt that low and ever-decreasing public spending on higher education as per OECD average, the financial crisis, and the reduction in the workforce are major causes of deteriorating ranking positions of Japanese universities. Such policy issues, however, demand a separate analysis and thus are not covered in this article.

2 The study is based on more than ten years of anthropological research (including participant observation and analysis of media and policy documents) in one of Japan's leading research universities and other similar research-oriented institutions. It also draws upon research in the fields of education, sociology, anthropology, and labour economics published in Japanese.

3 Tachibanaki (2010, p. 13) uses the term *burando daigaku* (brand universities) to denote Japan's most prestigious universities such as those listed here. "Brand" here does not necessarily mean an "image management tool for marketing" increasingly used proactively by higher education institutions globally but rather an "identity definition" (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008) of superiority and prestige shared by the public in Japan.

4 According to Tachibanaki (2010, pp. 20–1), less than 50 per cent of executive officers of listed companies are graduates of the twelve leading universities. He interprets this figure as a testimony that after all merit matters to go up the corporate ladder.

5 The trend since 2010 is a significant departure from the unfriendly recruitment and employment conditions for foreign recruits less than a decade ago. Breaden (2013,

p. 120) cites a 2008 Japanese government report in which almost half of the Japanese employers stated "they did nothing special to help new non-Japanese employees to adjust to the workplace" and describes efforts on the part of a Japanese private institution in offering special job placement services and lessons for international students.

6 Kenichi Ohmae, a well-known business consultant and social critic, deplores the state of Japanese corporate rivals that could not match Huawei's offer (Ohmae, 2018). He also criticizes the naïve Japanese engineering graduates who jumped at the Huawei salary rates without knowing that their counterparts based at the company's headquarters in Shenzhen, China, are paid twice as much. The Japanese hires seem to receive only half the "global standard" the company boasted it would provide.

7 Even prior to these, the tightened labour market disproportionately affected young people during a prolonged recession of the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, and the proportion of young workers not engaged in regular full-time employment has sharply increased since the 1990s (cf. Genda et al., 2010, p. 159; Ohtake & Inoki, 1997).

8 Although the two tracks are distinctively different, two groups of graduates that qualify for both tracks are (1) Japanese students who receive degrees from universities abroad and (2) international students in Japan. They can choose either the international or domestic recruitment pathway with their local language skills and knowledge of conventional hiring practices of Japanese corporations.

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