

Fostering Learner Agency through Career Building

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Abstract

Despite the gradual disappearance of lifetime employment and on-the-job training over the past three decades, and due, in part, to limited career guidance at the high school level, many Japanese students, upon entering university, have yet to seriously consider career options that they may wish to pursue, and after graduation, approximately 30% quit their first job within three years. In an effort to counter this trend and to address other challenges posed by changes involving recruitment guidelines which took effect earlier this year and the impact of COVID-19, this paper outlines a 3-year collaboration between the author and Ms. Hiroko Deguchi, a career consultant in the Career Development Office of Aoyama Gakuin University, to facilitate a broader community of practice among teachers, learners and career development professionals for the purpose of increasing university students' awareness of and participation in career development and job-hunting opportunities.

Fostering learner agency through career building was the focus of a workshop at the annual JALT Conference in 2020, given by the author and Ms. Hiroko Deguchi, a career consultant in the Career Development Office of Aoyama Gakuin University (Deguchi & Bollinger, 2020). This paper provides a synopsis of some of the ideas and information presented in the workshop, including challenges currently facing university students, ways to foster learner agency, and a brief overview of our 3-year collaboration, involving efforts to facilitate a broader community of practice among teachers, learners, and career development professionals for the purpose of increasing university students' awareness

of and participation in events and opportunities related to career development and preparation for job hunting.

Current challenges facing university students

Changes in hiring practices

Prior to and during Japan's "bubble economy," nearly all university graduates were hired and trained by Japanese companies, and their futures were secure. Most university graduates started in entry-level positions at Japanese companies, and their career paths were determined by company management. Consequently, choosing a career while at university was unnecessary, and the knowledge and skills that students acquired at university were often irrelevant to their positions within a company. During the past three decades, however, lifetime employment and on-the-job training, once hallmarks of Japan's "economic miracle," have become increasingly rare. According to the Internal Affairs Ministry, "Japanese companies sharply cut back on entry-level hiring in the late 1990s," and, as a result, among university graduates from that era, 35% of men and 9.6% of women have yet to secure full-time employment (Takada & Takezawa, 2020).

Now, only 25% of Japanese workers have been in the same job for more than 20 years (Takada & Takezawa, 2020). As a result, Japanese university students have been set adrift to sort out their own careers, often with limited career guidance at the high school level, and approximately 30% of university graduates end up quitting their first job within three years after graduation, a trend that began in 1995 and has remained constant, according to a study done by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare ("32% of new 2014 grads," 2017; Adachi, 2006). While this may be due, in part, to working conditions at some companies and the fact that online recruitment companies such as "Recruit Navi" and others have greatly simplified the process of "job-hopping," it is also true that many Japanese students lack clear career goals upon entering university. Although hiring policies have changed dramatically over the past three decades, there is still a tendency for many Japanese high school students to focus primarily on preparing for entrance exams, without giving serious consid-

eration to their own career goals or future aspirations.

Lack of career consciousness

To illustrate this point, let us consider the experience of a very gifted Japanese university student who participated in a study abroad program in Cambodia as a high school student. In a presentation about her experiences studying abroad, which she gave in a university course (taught by the author), the student commented that she had been amazed by the fact that, although all or most of the Cambodian students whom she had met came from relatively humble backgrounds, and few could speak English well, they all had specific goals and dreams for their future and were eager to talk about them. This talented Japanese student said that she had felt embarrassed because, despite having grown up in a developed country with many modern comforts and conveniences and a good education system, she was not studying for the purpose of realizing personal goals (Eimi Mori, July 2020). While this seemed a poignant realization to the student, it is certainly not uncommon for Japanese students to enter university without having seriously considered their future career aspirations. Between 1997 and 2021, thousands of 1st and 2nd year university students (in courses taught by the author) have indicated, on course intake forms and career development questionnaires, that they lacked clear career goals.

Although career guidance, (e.g., access to certified career counselors, career interest surveys, personality tests, career aptitude inventories such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), has been available to high school students in the U.S. and other developed countries since the 1970s, such career support for Japanese students is a relatively recent development. In 1915, the concept of “vocational guidance” was promoted by Munetoshi Irisawa and was included in the first national curriculum guidelines of Japan in 1947. However, the concept was based on American principles and theories, and this approach to career development, which encouraged students to identify their career interests and obtain the requisite knowledge and skills to pursue individual career aspirations, seemed at odds with prevailing cultural norms in an “academic qualification-based society” and with the employment practices of Japanese companies at

that time. Subsequently, responsibility for providing career guidance was relegated to class teachers and homeroom teachers (Fujita, 2011, p. 27-34).

However, in 1999, a report entitled, “Improvements in Articulation between Elementary and Secondary Schools, and Higher Education Institutions,” published by the Central Education Council, signaled the need for wide-ranging career education reform that would

help students to gain a desirable perspective of employment and work, as well as knowledge and skills related to work itself, and at the same time, encourage them to understand their own personalities so as to foster their abilities and attitudes and allow them to select their own careers independently.

Subsequent legislation involving career guidance and career education and related measures, implemented since 2002, to raise career consciousness among Japanese youth in order to promote stable employments have produced meaningful reforms but have failed to impact employment trends (Fujita, 2011, p. 29-44). However, new national curriculum guidelines for elementary and secondary schools, published in 2017, 2018, and 2019, which took effect in 2020, require all schools to provide career development programs, to initiate cumulative individual career portfolios from grade 1 to grade 12, and to provide opportunities for individual career counseling (Fujita, 2019, p. 6-7). This comprehensive approach to career education is both impressive and encouraging and bodes well, not only for Japanese youth, but for Japanese society, as a whole.

New recruitment guidelines

Due to long-held recruitment guidelines, relatively few Japanese university students have tended to seek career guidance before their third year at university, when they begin to prepare for job hunting. However, due to new recruitment guidelines, which were released in April of this year, 1st and 2nd year students may find it advantageous to begin focusing on career development and preparation for job hunting, as well. According to Keidanren, the Japan Business Federation, the reason for abolishing the previous recruitment guidelines was to

provide “flexibility in recruiting amid increasing competition for young and talented workers” (“Keidanren to scrap long-held recruitment,” 2018). Although plans to scrap recruitment guidelines were made public in 2017, many students are unaware of such changes or the impact that they will have on the job-hunting process for university students. Consequently, they may fail to take appropriate steps to adequately prepare for job hunting in a timely manner.

Impact of COVID-19

While online classes and teleworking, necessitated by the novel coronavirus, have proved beneficial in terms of preparing both students and the Japanese workforce for transition into the digital age, finding support and information related to career development and job hunting has been considerably more challenging for university students, due to limited access to campus facilities, student services, and networking opportunities. During the 2020 Academic Year, there was no easy way for students to contact staff at career development centers, or to participate in events, or to avail themselves of services that are normally provided, and many students did not know how to access these online.

At the same time, the economic impact of COVID-19 on the future job prospects of current university students cannot be overstated. In 2020, the two major Japanese airline companies, Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airways, along with the travel agency, HIS Company, cancelled plans to hire 2021 university graduates, and ANA planned to limit the number of new grads hired in 2022 to 200 (“ANA to slash new grad hiring,” 2020; “Japan Airlines to suspend recruitment,” 2020; Takada & Takezawa, 2020). Therefore, now, perhaps more than ever before, raising students’ awareness of career development resources and job-hunting events and opportunities and providing easy access to these, is crucial to safeguarding students’ ability to explore career options and take appropriate action to prepare for job hunting, in order to facilitate their smooth transition into the workforce following graduation. The foregoing challenges form the basis for the collaboration between the author and Ms. Hiroko Deguchi.

Fostering learner agency through focusing on career development

In 2018, Ms. Deguchi kindly offered to give a guest lecture for 1st and 2nd year students in the Integrated English (IE) Program of Aoyama Gakuin University who were enrolled in an IE seminar on contemporary social and global issues, (taught by the author). Prior to the lecture, the students prepared questions related to career development and job hunting, which Ms. Deguchi graciously addressed during her lecture. (Please see Appendix A.)

In preparation for the guest lecture, the seminar students participated in a variety of class activities focusing on career development and job hunting. These included checking the Career Development Center's online job hunting handbook, called "Web ASH" ("Web Aoyama *Shuushoku* Handbook"), completing a career development questionnaire, reading about job-hunting tips recommended by 4th year students and doing a related goal-setting task, learning about and discussing the experiences of Japanese university students who were successful in realizing their career goals, and reading and discussing news articles related to the current employment trends in Japan and proposed changes in job recruitment guidelines. Students were also introduced to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and links to additional resources, including online career interest surveys, were provided for students to explore on an optional basis.

Interviewing a guest speaker in class is an activity that students in the IE seminar do in preparation for interviewing mentors outside of class to learn from their first-hand experience about topics related to working in a company, job hunting, doing internships, volunteering, or studying or working abroad. In addition, prior to doing these interviews outside of class, students take part in activities such as interviewing the teacher and doing group and peer interviews with classmates who have done internships, or volunteering, or have lived, studied, traveled, or done homestays abroad. Finally, students prepare the questions for their interview, using questions from a template of ethnographic interview questions, based on the work of J. P. Spradley (1979), along with their own questions, and role play their interview with a partner. Following their interviews outside of class, students give presentations in class to share what they have learned from their mentors with their classmates and respond to their

questions during Q&A sessions. This interview project was featured in a workshop, entitled “Experiential learning through interviewing mentors” at the annual JALT Conference in Nagoya in 2019 (Bollinger, 2019). (Readers are welcome to use or adapt any of the course materials related to career development or the interview project which are available online. (<http://www.aogakudaku.org/materials-related-to-career-and-interview-projects/>))

Collaboration

Over the past decade, students enrolled in the IE seminar on contemporary social and global issues have participated in these class activities and have interviewed guest lecturers and done the interview project. However, never before 2018, had students’ comments about a guest lecture been so overwhelmingly positive. Students found Ms. Deguchi’s lecture to be extremely beneficial. Based on information that she provided, some students were motivated to take action such as checking the online job-hunting handbook and checking announcements related to career development and job-hunting events and opportunities on the Student Portal.

Therefore, in 2019 and again in 2020, Ms. Deguchi was invited to give a guest lecture to students in the IE seminar, and she graciously accepted. In 2019, in addition to her guest lecture, Ms. Deguchi gave a tour of the Career Development Center, and students met staff members and career counselors. Ms. Deguchi also provided a brief orientation to various job-hunting resources and explained how to access the “OB/OG” network. Following the lecture, Ms. Deguchi sent information and flyers related to upcoming career development events and opportunities to the author, which were forwarded to the seminar students, some of whom opted to apply for an internship or participate in a career development seminar.

In 2020, one of Ms. Deguchi’s colleagues in the Career Development Center, Ms. Asuka Tonouchi, who is responsible for organizing career development resources and events for 1st and 2nd year students, was invited to give a presentation at an online IE Teacher Orientation Meeting in September 2020. Ms. Tonouchi also participated in the online guest lecture that Ms. Deguchi gave in

October 2020 for the seminar students. For the first time, all IE students were welcome to attend the lecture. Following the lecture, students completed an online survey and feedback form, and all survey respondents expressed interest in between one and 11 (of 12) of the career development events, resources or support services provided by the Career Development Center, including company seminars, job interview training, internship opportunities, “OB/OG” networking etc. Students’ comments about the lecture were very positive, and it was apparent that they found the lecture to be extremely beneficial. (Please see Appendices B and C.) With the permission of Ms. Deguchi and Ms. Tonouchi, information from their lecture, including details of upcoming career development events, was forwarded to all IE teachers to share with their students. Subsequently, Ms. Deguchi and Ms. Tonouchi provided additional information and announcements regarding other upcoming career development events, which were also forwarded to IE teachers to pass along to students.

Many students were motivated to participate in events that were mentioned during the lecture. For example, one student contacted the Career Development Center on the same day to schedule an appointment for a consultation and was able to meet online with a career consultant that afternoon. Another student participated in an online company seminar the following day and attended a different seminar the following week. This student, who aspires to become an editor, was able to attend two seminars sponsored by large publishing companies and learned about ongoing changes in the industry and the future of publishing. While describing their experiences to classmates in the seminar, both students emphasized how valuable their experiences were and how their fear and concerns about job hunting had been transformed into enthusiasm and motivation to participate in other career development events. Several of the seminar students participated in other online company tours arranged by Ms. Deguchi, and many students who had attended the lecture registered for an online event the following week involving a panel talk session with 4th year students who described their job-hunting experiences, offered job-hunting tips, and answered students’ questions. From the foregoing examples, it is apparent that university students are interested in events and opportunities related to

career development and job hunting and are motivated to participate in such activities, if they are aware of them and know how to access the support and services that are available through the Career Development Center.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Japanese university students currently face enormous challenges in terms of choosing and pursuing meaningful careers. In the absence of employers who will determine what the majority of university graduates will do and become over the course of their careers, it is imperative that students receive appropriate career guidance and support, prior to and upon entering university, in order to make the most of their academic careers. Moreover, there are steps that we, as university educators, can take to foster learner agency through career building, in an effort to ensure that the talents, aspirations, and potential of Japanese youth are developed and fully realized. By collaborating with colleagues to facilitate a broader community of practice among teachers, learners, and career development professionals, it is possible to increase university students' awareness of and participation in events and opportunities related to career development and preparation for job hunting, which may, in turn, serve to increase the likelihood that university graduates will not simply find suitable employment, but will embark upon meaningful and rewarding career paths.

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Appendix A

Students' interview questions for guest lecture by Ms. Hiroko Deguchi

Preparing for job hunting

1. What kinds of qualifications are advantageous for job hunting?
2. Is a teacher's license advantageous for job hunting?
3. By when should I obtain any qualifications or licenses?
4. Under the current circumstances caused by the coronavirus, are there any specific steps to take to prepare job hunting?
5. When do students usually start researching about job hunting?
6. I will study abroad in Thailand next year, so I might start job hunting later than other students. What can I do to begin preparing for job hunting now?

Internships

1. Is it better to do an internship? If so, why?
2. When should we start applying for internships?
3. When do students generally begin doing internships?
4. How many internships should I do?
5. What is the student participation rate in summer internships and winter internships?
6. Is it true that doing an internship at some companies can lead to an offer of formal employment?

Choosing a career

1. I don't really have a dream or know what I want to do after graduating, so I would like some advice on finding out what I want to do and advice on finding good jobs.
2. How can I find a job that suits me well?
3. What is the most important factor to consider when choosing my future career?

Selecting a company/industry

1. When do most students start to choose or think about companies that they want to apply to?
2. What are important factors to consider when choosing or deciding on a company?
3. What points should we research about a company?

4. Should we research a variety of industries at first, rather than deciding a specific industry?
5. How can I find a company that suits my personality? I think that my work environment or colleagues are more important than what I actually do as a job.

Job-hunting process

1. What do you think is the most important thing to do or focus on when finding a job?
2. What are some things 1st and 2nd-year students could do to be successful in job-hunting?
3. What are some criteria that companies often look for in job candidates?
4. What impact has COVID-19 had on the rate of employment for university graduates?
5. Are there any common factors or qualifications among people who are successful in job-hunting?

Appendix B

Guest lecture online survey and feedback form

Thank you for attending the guest lecture and providing your feedback. Please feel free to contact the Career Development Center anytime if you have a question or would like assistance.

1. Please check any that you are interested in doing.

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Check Career Design Book online
- ☐ Watch Video Guidance online
- ☐ Attend job hunting seminars
- ☐ Participate in “Aogaku *Shu-katsu* Cafe”
- ☐ Do an internship
- ☐ Attend company seminars
- ☐ Participate in interview training sessions
- ☐ Contact an OB/OG
- ☐ Check AGU Student Portal for announcements about job hunting and career development events
- ☐ Check Web Ash website for information about job hunting and career development
- ☐ Get help with writing entry sheets
- ☐ Meet with consultant to discuss career

2. Please write your comments about the lecture.

Appendix C

Student feedback on guest lecture

“It was a very valuable thing to hear from professionals about job hunting.”

“Through this lecture, I noticed the importance of preparing for job hunting the first time. It was a precious opportunity.”

“Since I did not know a lot about Aogaku’s career service, today’s lecture was very helpful. I got to know a lot about it, and I think I would like to use the service and be prepared for job-hunting. Thank you for the lecture today.”

“The lecture was very helpful because the guest speakers talked about job-hunting in this covid-19 situation. I didn’t know that the career center in Aogaku is holding so many events related to job-hunting. I have done almost nothing for job-hunting, so I want to make use of these events and Web Ash in order to prepare for job-hunting.”

“I checked Web Ash after the guest lecture. I didn’t know about Web Ash, so I am pleased I can use it from today. I was very worried about job-hunting, so this lecture was informative and made me confident.”

“I have not learned about job hunting since I became college student, but I could learn it

through Ms. Deguchi and Ms. Tonouchi. Thank you for arranging this seminar.”

“Thank you so much for your presentation. I didn’t know anything about job-hunting the lecture was good opportunity for me. Also, Ms. Deguchi said “ Feel free to come to career center” so I felt safe and I decided to go to career center. Thank you so much, Deguchi san, Tonouchi san.”

“By listening to guest lecture, I could gain lots of information about support we can get from career center. I want to join some seminars and look though web ash.”

“I thought that it is necessary for me to self-analyze what I am interested in at first. I haven’t decided what kind of jobs I would like to get, and I also don’t know what jobs I’m interested in, so I would like to find it through career centers and seminars. Thank you very much for valuable lecture today.”

“Since I’m still a freshman, I don’t have a solid plan for my future career. However, I think that I obtained some valuable information today, during this lecture. Right now, I am at the starting point of job hunting, I really thought that participating in a talking session with fourth year students and actively using Web Ash are the priority points for job hunting. I knew that there is a 就活 center in AGU, but I’ve never used that resource before. I really think that it will be a really helpful and valuable resource for me to find an ideal company, so from now on, I would like to use those resources actively and take quick action.”

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