On New Approaches to Career Development Workshops for International Students at Japanese Universities

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1. Background and introduction

There has been increased debate in the media, government and Japanese HR community about the development of global talent and global business practices, with Japanese businesses continuing to set targets for international expansion largely driven by shrinking domestic markets and increasing global competition (Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2011; Ebihara, 2011).

Building a global workforce and the hiring of non-Japanese employees

Building global companies "will require many Japanese executives to think in new and unfamiliar ways about organization, marketing, and strategy. The approaches that proved successful in the past…… have outlived their usefulness". (Iwatani et al., 2011, para. 3). This can be said to apply not just to general business practices but also to the field of talent acquisition, management and development.

Approaches to global talent development being considered by organizations in Japan can be divided into two broad categories: firstly, the provision of global skill training and development opportunities for Japanese employees and, secondly, the hiring of non-Japanese employees.

Both of these approaches are presenting challenges for organizations in Japan, and the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Doyukai) has highlighted that the lack of transparent and clear talent management processes and standards mean that the effective hiring and utilization of non-Japanese employees is an ongoing issue of concern (Keizai Doyukai, 2012).

Global talent, in particular, refers to Japan’s need to build a workforce with the ability to thrive and survive in an international business environment with increasingly rapid and unpredictable change. One of the strategies being taken by Japanese companies is to start or to increase the recruitment of non-Japanese staff in their offices in Japan.

The pool of international students in Japan is seen by Japanese organizations as a significant source of non-Japanese employees. However, international students are not always given the necessary skills and advice to enable them to successfully join a company which best meets their interests and fully utilizes their skill set. The resulting mismatch between student expectations and employer requirements has resulted in concern among Japanese companies that international students
are more difficult to manage and that the hiring of non-Japanese employees will result in an increased turnover rate (Japan Society for the Promotion of Machine Industry - Economic Research Institute, 2010).

The Japanese job-hunting system: “Shuushoku Katsudou” (就職活動)

The standard Japanese job-hunting process, known as shuushoku katsudou, is highly structured and for most large corporations typically involves an online written application (“entry sheet”), multiple seminars and interviews. After suitable candidates have been identified, the notification process is also highly formalized starting with the offer of a “naitei” (informal job offer) prior to an official job offer.

These unique characteristics of the shuushoku katsudou process present particular challenges for international students because they do not have the informal information networks or educational and social background to help them understand the nature of this process. In addition, most companies still only accept Japanese-language applications with the practical effect of excluding many of the international students without fluent Japanese language skills.

2. Available career development support services for international students

Career development support in Japanese universities: Shuushoku-ka (就職課)

Most universities in Japan do not have a specific career advisory center for international students, so international students are often directed to the shuushoku-ka (就職課) which can be loosely translated as the student career advisory service.

These departments are primarily organized to provide information on the shuushoku katsudou process and provide information generally catered to the majority of students who are native Japanese speakers looking for work within Japan. In this respect, they are unable to adequately address the broader needs of international students because these students are more likely to be considering a wider variety of international locations for their future career and are unable to utilize the advisory materials available due to a lack of Japanese language skills.

Career development support provided by commercial organizations

There are also several for-profit or commercial organizations that specialize in providing counseling and support for international students in Japan. However, these organizations do not necessarily give the most appropriate advice as their revenue is derived from placing students into vacancies, regardless of whether these meet the students’ future career interests or needs.

In this respect, not-for-profit organizations or academic bodies are often better placed to provide non-biased support and advice to international students.

3. An Action Research Project:
Career Development Workshops for International Students at Tokyo University International Center

A new approach to career development developed at Tokyo University International Center (Hongo Campus) started in 2011 and is centered on the provision of a series of career development workshops. This involves 4-5 career development workshops for international students (in English and Japanese) offered across the year with between 30-45 participants attending each depending on the capacity of the location and the type of topic.
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These workshops have two key objectives: Firstly to help students make better decisions about their future career path, and secondly, to get a more accurate understanding of the Japanese business environment.

A new career development framework: “Create your own Job Hunting Toolkit”

Diagram 1 shows the framework upon which the workshop series is designed. This framework was originally designed for the circumstances of international students in Japan although it could be applied to students of any nationality.

Diagram 1: Career Development Workshop Series Framework

Stage 1: “Knowing Yourself”

This part of the workshop involves the introduction of two types of tools: Firstly, tools that help students better understand their own criteria upon which to evaluate preferred job characteristics and preferred career locations. Secondly, methods are also provided to help the students identify their strengths many of which are the classic “transferable skills”. Transferable skills are often skills that students have developed through their research activities and experience at university, but can be applied in a variety of social contexts. Examples of transferable skills are communication skills, presentation skills, problem-solving, negotiation skills, networking and so on. (Japan Society for the Promotion of Machine Industry - Economic Research Institute, 2012, p28)

Since many of the international students may have been carrying out advanced research in a very narrow research field, they can struggle to understand how to communicate their skills in a way that is relevant to potential employers in non-academic contexts. For this reason, an opportunity to better understand their own strengths can be very useful for the students.

Stage 2: “Promoting Yourself”

The second stage covered in the workshop relates to communication skills. The tools introduced in this part of the workshop series help students improve the way they communicate their strengths and relevant experience, both verbally and in writing, to prospective employers.

The main objective of this part of the workshop is to give students the chance to apply methods to help them communicate their own set of unique strengths and experience, or “unique selling points”, in a more impactful manner.

A typical problem addressed in this part of the workshop series is to help students avoid using specialist research terminology when they are giving a
Stage 3: "Finding and Making Contact with a Potential Employer"

The first stage of the shuushoku katsudou process for most large corporations in Japan involves students filling in an online “entry sheet”. The online “entry sheet” categories are often designed with only Japanese students in mind so it is difficult for international students to highlight their unique experience and skills. In this respect, international students need to consider ways, other than the typical shuushoku katsudou route, in which they can reach potential employers. In order to address this, face-to-face and virtual networking concepts and approaches are introduced in the workshop series to help international students explore multiple alternative ways to gain information and reach potential employers in their specific field or industry of interest.

Stage 4: "Understanding the potential employer"

The purpose of this final stage in the workshop is to give students simple hints and tips on how to understand the needs and interests of potential employers. Among the skills practiced are strategies such as using open questions so that the students can adapt their style of enquiry to become better at obtaining the specific information they are looking for from a potential employer.

Other key features of the workshop series

(a) An opportunity for self-reflection and understanding personal motivations

Many international students may have not had an opportunity to consider their future goals beyond graduation prior to coming to Japan. The dramatic change of environment and surroundings that they experience through their studies in Japan may be the trigger for them to see themselves and their future in a completely new light. This consequently often leads them to reconsider their interest in their chosen specialist subject of study.

In addition, unlike Japanese students, international students often do not have access to a network of peers or “sempai” (students in years above them) with whom they can freely discuss their concerns and wishes. This means that it is especially important for international students to be given guidance and models to help them explore their personal interests and expectations for the future.

(b) Practical skills with an opportunity to practice in a safe environment

Simple models and practical skills are introduced in the workshops so that students can apply them straight away. Simple models that can be remembered quickly are chosen, one example being that of the “elevator pitch” model. The elevator pitch model is explained as one framework that students can use to help improve their self-introduction and create a better impact on first meetings with individuals that might be able to connect them with a future job.

After explaining the model students are given some time to use this model to write down their elevator pitch. The next part of the workshop involves students giving self-introductions to each other in pairs while imagining that the person they are talking to is an HR recruiting manager. The first time students do this exercise they are given 2 minutes maximum within which to provide their self-introduction. This exercise is repeated several times allowing the students to get used to speaking out loud and continually refine the content. Each time the students are allowed to give feedback to each other and the exercise is made increasingly challenging by reducing the time allowed.
down to 1 minute for the final self-introduction.

The benefit of this approach is that students can apply new models immediately within the workshop and practice in a safe environment.

(c) Joint workshop design and delivery by a combination of Japanese and non-Japanese instructors

The workshops are designed and delivered by two instructors together – one native Japanese instructor and one non-Japanese instructor (who has experienced being an international student in Japan and has also experienced the process of job hunting in Japan).

This combination of cross-cultural instruction has several benefits: First of all, it means that students get access to a wider range of responses to any questions or queries. This is particularly important as international students are often quick to over-generalize or rely on stereotypes with regard to companies in Japan; for example, a common misconception by international students is that all Japanese companies force employees to do lots of overtime.

A further benefit is that international students often place higher credibility on advice that is provided by someone who has personal experience as an international student or has the experience of looking for and finding work in Japan as a non-Japanese person.

(d) Involvement by corporate professionals in HR

Another key feature of the workshop series is the involvement of HR hiring managers from large Japanese corporations. HR hiring managers and staff from several corporations have volunteered their time to take part as interviewers in mock interview exercises and as pretend hiring managers in mock networking exercises. These same managers provide observations and advice to students at the end of each workshop and the HR managers themselves say that they benefit from the workshop as it helps them gain a better understanding of the goals of international students and the challenges that these students face in Japan.

Furthermore, the involvement of practicing HR professionals not only helps create a more energized atmosphere in the workshops, but keeps the content of the workshops up-to-date and relevant, and facilitates a three-way learning experience for participants, instructors and HR hiring managers to learn more about each others’ perspectives.

4. Future development: From the classroom to an online platform

Currently the tools and models in these workshops can only be introduced to a restricted number of students in a face-to-face context. However, it is hoped that through funding from educational bodies and institutions in Japan that it will be possible in the future to create an online version of the workshops so that international students across Japan can gain access to these tools and methods, for free, regardless of where they are studying. This would also take into account the fact that the current generation of university students, both in Japan and in other countries, increasingly communicate and gather information online.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper presents an action research project which took the form of a series of career development workshops for international students at Tokyo University International Center. Feedback from participants and anecdotal evidence has demonstrated that these workshops are beneficial in helping international students better navigate their way through the career development and job-hunting process. In terms of the impact of the workshops, several students have found work in Japan and report that the workshops enabled them to make good
decisions to lead to a rewarding and fulfilling career in Japan.

However, in order to gain the necessary level of recognition and credibility to secure sufficient funding for the expansion of the workshops (both face-to-face and online) the authors recognize that the next step is to develop a rigorous quantitative and qualitative study to demonstrate the concrete and long-term benefits of this type of career development support for international students.

<References>