

Developing the capacity for a proactively self-managed career:

An analysis of aspiring new-generation employees in Japan

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Abstract

Japan has a big mismatch between the skills new-generation employees possess and the skills employers expect, with Japanese employers reporting a lower average satisfaction with graduate skills than that reported globally. By drawing on the concepts of 'future work self' and 'proactive career behaviour', this paper compares and contrasts the similarities and differences between Japanese and international students who will enter the workforce soon and explores why such a big gap in skills exists. As the results show, due to their unique social and cultural background and the influence of their contextual environments, fewer Japanese students develop the knowledge and skills important to their futures in comparison with international students, making them largely reliant on the concept of an organisational career rather than a proactively self-managed one. Better graduate outcomes require more tailor-made career counselling services to support students. Students should also familiarise themselves with employers' expectations regarding desired skills.

Keywords: future work self, career planning, proactive career behaviour, self-managed career, contextual factors, Japan

Key points

- 1 A significant mismatch exists between the skills new-generation employees possess and the skills employers expect in Japan.
- 2 Individuals must take considerable responsibility for proactively managing their employability throughout their professional careers.
- 3 The unique Japanese recruiting and education systems equip the new generation of Japanese employees with few 'proactive career behaviours'.

Introduction

The shift from organisational to self-managed careers has led to an increasing need for graduates to develop the mindset and skills necessary to identify and manage career pathways effectively. These pathways must be suited to their unique circumstances, particular goals and capabilities and also require individuals to be proactive in coping with, and succeeding in, a self-managed career environment (Jackson and Tomlinson 2020). Consequently, a considerable responsibility is placed on an individual in terms of proactively managing their employability at the point of entering the job market and beyond. Each individual must make investments in their own skills and human capital development (Tomlinson and Nghia 2020). In Japan, however, ‘proactive career behaviour’ is less important among new employees due to Japan’s particular recruiting system. For instance, most new employees in Japan are recruited from a pool of new graduates. Since these graduates receive training upon employment at their company (Debroux 2016), they do not have to think as much about acquiring skills for their future careers prior to graduation as students do in other countries (Saito and Pham 2020). Hence, a significant mismatch exists between the skills new graduates possess and the skills employers expect, with Japanese employers reporting an average satisfaction score of only 39 points for graduate skills, compared to a global average of 66 (QS 2019).

While this particular Japanese recruiting system has been in place for nearly 60 years, companies now consider it to be an obstacle to securing employees with the knowledge and skills needed in an increasingly competitive and globalized business environment. Thus, the Japanese business federation Keidanren has decided to abolish this system in April 2021 (Keidanren 2018). The guidelines for the new system emphasize more diverse recruitment practices, such as year-round recruitment, more commonly seen in other countries and call for autonomous career development and independent learning on the part of employees (Keidanren 2020). Hence, future graduates in Japan will be required to absorb different job-seeking behaviours and invest more heavily in their individual skills in order to self-manage their careers.

Therefore, it is timely to investigate these important issues and present possible solutions for both individual students and higher education institutions. By examining the similarities and differences between Japanese and international students at a private university in Japan who will enter the workforce soon, we have been able to explore why such skill gaps

exist among new-generation employees in Japan through the conceptual analysis of ‘future work self’ and ‘proactive career behaviour’. The concept of ‘future work self’ addresses individuals’ capabilities in terms of imagining themselves in their future careers and reflects on their hopes and aspirations towards future work (Strauss, Griffin and Parker 2012). Several studies have shown that greater clarity with regards to one’s ‘future work self’ leads to stronger ‘proactive career behaviour’. For example, Strauss et al. (2012) found that future work self is positively related to an individual’s proactive career behaviour. This relationship was confirmed by Taber and Blankemeyer (2014), who also found that people with stronger senses of their future work selves were more likely to engage in career planning, proactive skill development and networking behaviours, all of which lead to positive career outcomes.

However, unique contextual factors, such as the Japanese recruiting and educational systems and the related obstacles discussed earlier, may have a profound impact on students’ career behaviour. Hence, in this research, we aim to address the following questions: 1) What are the differences between Japanese and non-Japanese students regarding their future work selves and career behaviour? 2) What contextual factors influence Japanese students’ different attitudes towards future work and career behaviour?

To tackle these questions, we adopted a comparative research approach and conducted a survey among university students from Japan and abroad at a private Japanese university. By comparing the data obtained from these two groups of students, this paper investigates the differences in future work selves and career behaviours between them and analyses whether the skill gap confronting the new generation of Japanese workers is rooted in weaker future work selves and less proactive career behaviours. In addition, we discuss the implications for theory with a new conceptual framework and identify what needs to be addressed in order to achieve better graduate outcomes in the future. This research makes meaningful contributions to the development of a new framework by adding contextual factors into the interplay between ‘future work self’, ‘proactive career behaviour’ and possible outcomes.

Underpinning literature and background

This study, in line with the trends in the recent literature on ‘future work self’, ‘career management competencies’, ‘career self-management’ and ‘proactive career behaviours’ (Clements and Kamau 2017; Jackson and Tomlinson 2019; Jackson and Wilton 2017; Runhaar

et al. 2019; Smale et al. 2018; Strauss et al. 2012; Taber and Blankemeyer 2014), focuses on a comparison between Japanese and non-Japanese students regarding future work selves and career behaviour.

According to Strauss et al. (2012), the term ‘future work self’ refers to an individual’s representation of himself or herself in the future that reflects their hopes and aspirations in relation to work. In other words, it is based on hope for one’s possible self and is a cognitive representation of who one hopes to become in the future (Markus and Nurius 1986). An explicit orientation towards the future enables individuals to take risks and set more ambitious goals. It also potentially stretches people’s aspirations and broadens their creative thinking about future possibilities, thus better equipping them to shape their careers proactively (Strauss et al. 2012: 581). Using this logic, individuals who can manage their future careers proactively and obtain greater clarity with regards to their future work selves should have greater engagement in proactive career behaviours, such as career planning, proactive skill development and networking behaviours (Taber and Blankemeyer 2014).

On the other hand, nowadays, university graduates face an increasingly competitive labour market and many difficulties in finding employment (Helyer and Lee 2014). Hence, individuals have become responsible for managing their own career successes. According to Clements and Kamau (2017: 2279), although the ‘employability’ of graduates is a strategic priority of the higher education sector, there are few cognitive and behavioural explanations as to why some university students do better than others in terms of developing their employability. With clear career goal setting and ideas regarding future work selves, students can do better in career planning, career consultations, developing relevant skills and building career networks.

These career planning and preparation steps require students to develop certain career self-management competencies that are critical to employability (Clarke 2009). According to Watts (2006), there are four career management competency dimensions, namely, development of decision-making skills, opportunity awareness, transition learning and self-awareness/efficacy. By combining these capabilities, individuals will be able to self-reflect and recognise their personal strengths and vocational interests, identify suitable graduate opportunities in their chosen field, conduct effective job searches and present themselves well during selection processes (Jackson and Wilton 2017). As Runhaar et al. (2019) points out, there is a positive relationship between an individual’s self-efficacy and their tendency to

appraise career challenges rather than avoid them. In addition, individuals with strong learning goal orientations are likely to view career self-management as both a challenge and an opportunity to learn because they search continuously for ways to improve their knowledge and skills (Vandewalle 2003). These self-assessment and continuous learning and searching activities could also be viewed as proactive career management behaviour.

According to Grant and Ashford (2008), proactive behaviour is self-initiated, future-oriented and change-inducing. Hence, proactive career behaviour refers to self-directed activities an individual engages in to manage their career (Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant 2001). Previous research has demonstrated that proactive career behaviours are positively related to career success (e.g. De Vos, Dewettinck, and Buyens 2009; Smale et al. 2018; Verbruggen, Sels, and Forrier 2007). However, university students from different cultures are likely to use different means, as well as apply different values and norms, when evaluating how to achieve so-called 'successful career outcomes' (Dries, Pepermans, and Carlier 2008; Smale et al. 2018). Moreover, the underpinning literature has not discussed the ways in which contextual factors influence students' career behaviours and thus their employability. As Tomlinson and Nghia (2020:5) point out, "employability is a complex interaction between broader structural influences and individuals' own agency. It is ultimately bound up in context and wider conditions of the labour market, society, educational structures, and influences in individuals' own lives". Therefore, it is important to compare and contrast the behaviours of individuals with different cultural and national backgrounds in order to understand the influences of their different social and cultural norms.

Thus far, the vast majority of empirical studies on career management and proactive career behaviours have been conducted in Western countries in response to increasing pressures to produce employable graduates (Bridgstock 2009). The discussion has focused on developing a model of desirable graduate attributes that emphasises the importance of self-management and career building skills to lifelong career management and enhanced employability. However, the discussion on career management skills (e.g. Bridgstock 2009) has continued to be conducted at a broader level, as in examinations of creating realistic and personally meaningful career goals, identifying and engaging in strategic work decisions and learning opportunities, achieving a work-life balance and appreciating the broader relationships between work, the economy and society. Thus, more specific empirical research needs to be conducted on those

key elements necessary for building career management skills, such as career planning, proactive skill development and networking behaviours.

Empirical research on developing career management skills has focused on a number of specific issues, such as the factors influencing the ways in which graduates approach career decision making (Greenbank 2011); graduates' perceived employability and the associated influences of career management competences, work experience and individual characteristics (Jackson and Wilton 2017); and graduates' career values and their relationship to proactivity in career self-management (Jackson 2019). While these studies have generated several specific and meaningful outcomes regarding career (self-)management skills, they have mainly examined cases in Australia, Canada and the UK, i.e. Western countries.

In addition, previous conceptual and empirical studies based on individuals' cognitive and behavioural elements have also failed to consider the interplay between these internal and external factors. Given the increasing call for the inclusion of context in HRM research (see Cooke 2018; Kaufman 2015), investigating the contextual factors influencing graduates' career self-management behaviour presents an excellent research avenue.

Therefore, it is our intention to develop this research path by investigating relevant issues in a non-Western country, namely Japan, and linking individual elements with its unique contextual environment, namely its recruiting and educational systems as well as its social and cultural norms. Such contextual factors may impact how Japanese and international students manage their careers through career planning, proactive skill development and networking behaviours. By comparing and contrasting these two student groups, we can link individuals' career behaviours with important contextual issues, such as culture, labour market policies and the norms and practices used in employment relations.

Background of the relevant cultural elements and recruiting system in Japan

A successful career within a company in Japan is limited to those who are consistent, loyal, keen to learn, and, most importantly, persistent in their efforts to achieve organizational goals to the best of their ability (Pilz and Alexander 2020). Accordingly, most employees develop their careers in line with these organizational goals rather than the individual goals required for a self-managed career. For example, many office workers stay beyond normal working hours and do not leave work until their superiors leave. In addition, they often assist them with non-

work related activities, such as funeral preparations. Employees engage in these tasks because they know that their human qualities and personhood outside their job specifications are constantly subject to corporate appraisals that might affect their chances of promotion and salary increases (Sugimoto 2020). This situation is the direct result of the Japanese-style management system, which features employment security until mandatory retirement, seniority-based wages and promotions, enterprise unions, extensive company training and education as well as standardized recruitment of new graduates once a year (Moriguchi 2014).

Generally speaking, university graduates in Japan become employed in April every year shortly after graduation in March. Accordingly, the recruiting process starts a year before graduation, with companies beginning their guidance sessions for interested third-year students in March and making hiring decisions starting in June (Kuriyama 2017). The application process starts with students filling out application forms on the Internet. Then the companies select students for written tests and interviews. Up to this point, the job search process resembles the “free market” model of matching students with employers. After this first round, the college receives announcements of job openings from companies that were unable to fill their positions in the first round. The office recommends companies to the students who were unable to find a job in the first round, leaving it up to the students to contact them and request interviews (Ishida 2011). In addition, schools and faculty can play important intermediary roles in matching the students with potential jobs, especially students in the natural science fields, as relationships persist between employers and universities (Rebick 2005)¹.

Due to this process in Japan, there appears to be a very successful transition from university to work for most graduates. For example, the employment rate for job seekers who graduated from universities in spring 2019 was 97.6% (The Japan Times 2019). Until they are hired, these graduates normally would not have any work experience applicable to the company that has hired them. Therefore, companies are interested primarily in the trainability of new recruits and assume that their job skills will improve as they accumulate work experience after

¹ The recruiting process for students in the natural sciences can be a bit different because their professors often recommend them to employers directly, which is usually not the case for students in the social sciences and humanities, who go through the normal recruiting process described above. Hence, these relationships in the natural sciences are very important in terms of finding employment for students.

joining the company (Fujimoto 2017). Because employees are not recruited for specific jobs, the selection of new employees is focused on personal qualities, such as the ability to communicate effectively, drive, enthusiasm and team spirit, which are seen as necessary prerequisites in lieu of specific skills (Debroux 2016). Consequently, employees acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for their jobs while working (Fujimoto 2018). These practices have contributed to the shaping of the philosophy of the Japanese education system (i.e., what should be taught and how and for what purpose the learning process should be organised) and established the complex relationship between recruitment and education in Japan (Debroux, 2016), providing the contextual background for Japanese students' mindsets and behaviours. As described earlier, while this traditional, predominant recruiting practice has been in place in Japan for almost 60 years and has offered lifetime employment to new graduates who, in turn, have provided security for major Japanese firms, the Japanese business federation Keidanren has decided to abolish it, together with existing guidelines on how firms should recruit new graduates. With these guidelines ending for students who will be graduating in March 2021 and thereafter, this change will have significant implications for the business community as well as universities and their graduates, on which we elaborate in further detail in the final section of this paper.

Methodology

Sample and procedure

In order to facilitate a comparative analysis between Japanese and international students, survey participants were recruited at a Japanese private university that offers classes for both groups of students. A total of 72 Japanese students and 62 international students (n=134) participated in the survey, with 36% of the international students coming from Europe, 39% from North America, 16% from Asia and 8% from South America. The average age of the international students was 22, the majority of these students were in their 3rd or 4th year of study and 58% of them were female, while 42% were male². For the Japanese students, the average age was 20, the majority were in their 2nd year of study and 75% were female, whereas 25% were male.

² The ages at which studies commence and years of study differ by country. While in the U.S it generally takes four years to earn a bachelor's degree and students normally enter university after 12 years of education, in a number of European countries, it takes only 3 years to earn a bachelor's degree, and students enter university after 13 years of education. Accordingly, most students were in their last year of study during the exchange.

Although the ages and years of study differ between the two groups, the sample is suitable for comparison because, as described earlier, the job hunting process starts during Japanese students' 3rd year, whereas, for international students, this process usually starts at the end of their studies in their home countries. All respondents received either a paper questionnaire or a QR code that directed them to an online questionnaire, depending on their preference. An English version of the questionnaire was distributed to the international students, while the Japanese students received a questionnaire in Japanese.

To measure how participants see their future work selves, we applied five items developed by Strauss et al. (2012) that focus on the salience of the future work self. This salience of the future work self “is the degree to which the future work self is clear and easy to imagine for a person”, and an elaborate future work self is proposed to “generate openness to relevant information and feedback, thereby prompting greater proactive career behaviour” (Strauss et al. 2012: 581). Sample items include “My future is very easy for me to imagine” and “I am very clear about who and what I want to become in my future work”.

To measure proactive career behaviour, we applied six items from the measures used by Taber and Blankemeyer (2014), including two items on career planning (“I know what I need to do to reach my career goal”, and “I have not really decided what my career objectives should be yet”), two items on proactive skill development (“I am gaining experience in a variety of areas to increase my knowledge and skills”, and “I am developing knowledge and skills in tasks critical to my future”) and two items on proactive career networking (“I am building a network of contacts to obtain information about how to get the job that I want” and “I am building a network of contacts I can call for advice on how to be successful in the job”). All items used a Likert response scale, which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The five items selected for future work self were treated as one construct, while the sets of two items for the three areas of proactive career behaviour were retained as separate constructs.

To minimize issues associated with common method variance (CMV), we implemented a variety of preventative measures, as suggested by Tehseen et al. (2017). These measures included the spatial separation of the independent variable (Future Work Self) from dependent variables (Proactive Career Behaviour) in the questionnaire, assuring respondent anonymity, and keeping the questions as specific, simple and concise as possible to minimize ambiguity. While the survey design was identical in the English and Japanese versions of the questionnaire,

the survey questions were translated into Japanese and back translated into English for linguistic validation by two independent bilingual translators, thus guaranteeing the semantic crossover, validity and authenticity of the two sets of scale items. Furthermore, we conducted two tests to detect if there were any potential CMV issues. We first conducted the widely used Harman's one-factor test (Fuller et al. 2016) and inspected the correlation matrix for any highly correlated factors (Bagozzi et al. 1991). The Harman's one-factor test results indicated there was no single factor that accounted for more than 50% of the variance (Podsakoff and Organ 1986; Podsakoff et al. 2003), and the correlation matrix failed to reveal any strong correlations (> 0.80) between factors (Kline 2010). Based on these two procedures, we were able to conclude that there were no serious CMV issues.

In terms of data normality, the skewness ranged from -0.02 ("My future is very easy for me to imagine") to .06 ("I can easily imagine my Future Work Self") and the kurtosis ranged from -1.125 ("My future is very easy for me to imagine") to -0.20 ("I am developing knowledge and skills in tasks critical to my future"). These values are well within the accepted range of ± 2 (George and Mallery 2010), and the data were deemed appropriate for analysis.

Principal component analysis with oblique rotation (Direct Quartimin) was conducted to identify the factors of interest. The proposed three factors for Proactive Career Behaviour were extracted based on eigenvalues greater than 1 (Skill Development = 2.90, 48.26%; Career Planning = 1.2, 18.71%; Career Networking = 1.04, 17.33%), and the cumulative extracted variance was 84.30%. Using the same settings, Future Work Self (3.40, 67.94%) was confirmed as a single factor. Additional detailed results concerning the factor structure are shown in Table 1. Nearly all of the measurement item loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of .70 (Hair et al. 2010); however, Career Planning ("I know what I need to do to reach my career goal") had a loading of .53. Nonetheless, this item was retained to preserve the integrity of the factor. Table 1 also lists the composite reliability (CR) scores, which all exceed the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al. 2010), and the average variance extracted (AVE) values, all of which are over 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981), demonstrating that the scales are reliable and valid.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Analysis

For the analysis of future work selves and career behaviours, we conducted an independent *t*-test to see whether there was a significant difference between Japanese and international students with regards to future work self and career behaviour. We first combined the five items that measured future work self into one variable called ‘future work self’. Next, we combined the six items that measured proactive career behaviour into three variables, which were identified as ‘career planning,’ ‘proactive skill development’ and ‘proactive career networking’. To analyse the relation between career behaviour with future work self, we conducted simple linear regression for each of the three variables measuring proactive career behaviour using ‘future work self’ as the predictor variable. All data were analysed using IBM SPSS version 27.

Results

Table 2 shows the results of the independent *t*-test, including the distributions in both groups for ‘future work self’, ‘career planning’, ‘proactive skill development’ and ‘proactive career networking’, as well as the respective *p*- and *r*-values. As the results show, the mean values for ‘future work self’ for the Japanese ($M = 3.09$) and international ($M = 3.05$) students were fairly similar. Accordingly, no statistically significant difference was detected between the two groups since the *p*-value was well above the assigned statistical significance level of 0.05.

However, with regards to career behaviour, Japanese students showed less agreement in terms of proactive career behaviours than international students. As demonstrated in Table 2, the mean values for the Japanese students were consistently lower than those for the international students for all items measured, including ‘career planning,’ ‘proactive skill development’ and ‘proactive career networking’. This finding was particularly obvious in the case of ‘proactive skill development’; the Japanese students had a mean value of 3.27, while the international students had a mean value of 3.65. This difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.033$). Although the calculated *r*-value indicated a weak effect size, the results indicate that fewer Japanese students proactively develop the knowledge and skills that are critical for their futures.

Insert Table 2 about here.

In order to analyse the relationship between career behaviour and future work self, we conducted simple linear regression analyses, and the results are presented in Table 3. As the results show, 'future work self' predicted engagement in all of the proactive career behaviours measured, including 'career planning', 'proactive skill development' and 'proactive career networking', for both Japanese and international students, meaning that students who had a clear vision of their future work were also more likely to engage in proactive career behaviour. This finding was particularly evident in 'career planning', which had the strongest correlation with 'future work self' ($\beta=.55$, $p<0.001$) for the Japanese students as well as the international students ($\beta=.70$, $p<0.001$). On the other hand, the correlation of 'proactive skill development' with 'future work self' was weaker and less significant for the Japanese students than it was for the international students ($\beta=.25$, $p<0.05$ vs. $\beta=.43$, $p<0.001$), reflecting the finding that developing knowledge and skills proactively is less important for Japanese students, even for those with a pronounced 'future work self'. In terms of 'proactive career networking', however, the results showed a more significant and stronger correlation with 'future work self' for Japanese students than for international students ($\beta=.42$ and $p<0.001$ vs. $\beta=.29$ and $p<0.05$), indicating that Japanese students with a pronounced 'future work self' were more likely to develop career networks than their international peers.

Insert Table 3 about here.

Discussion and conclusion

Our sample results show a number of interesting phenomena, particularly when comparing the data for Japanese and international students. As Table 2 demonstrated, although Japanese students did not have less pronounced future work selves than their international peers, we found less 'proactive career behaviour' among Japanese students throughout all items measured, including 'career planning,' 'proactive skill development' and 'proactive career networking'. This less pronounced behaviour was particularly evident in the case of 'proactive skill development', with markedly fewer Japanese students developing the knowledge and skills critical to their futures, which could indicate the influence of the Japanese contextual environment on Japanese students' behaviours. As discussed earlier, due to the specific corporate culture in Japan, which prioritizes the achievement of organizational goals rather than individual ones, Japanese students feel less compelled to develop certain career self-management competencies. Since these students will receive job-related training upon

employment at a company after graduation, they do not have to think about the acquisition of skills for their future careers as much as students from other countries do.

In addition, we also found a less significant and weaker correlation between the variables ‘future work self’ and ‘proactive skill development’ for Japanese students compared to international students. In other words, even Japanese students who were very clear about their future and knew exactly who and what they wanted to become in terms of their future work did not show stronger ‘proactive skill development’ than those who had less pronounced future work selves. These results could lead to the conclusion that, due to the particular recruiting system in Japan, along with its relevant policies and practices, students are more reliant on their future employers to provide the training relevant to their potential careers, while international students are more independent with regards to career development. Thus, because they believe that their employers will train them in all necessary skills after graduation, the Japanese students do not proactively develop their skills to a level that would meet employers’ expectations, leading to the huge skill gap described earlier.

Furthermore, since employment mostly takes place right after graduation and networks play an important role in matching students to jobs, we found a more significant and stronger correlation between ‘future work self’ and ‘proactive career networking’ among Japanese students. This correlation means that Japanese students with clear visions of their future work were more likely to develop a network from which to solicit information, advice or even introductions. In terms of career planning, we were able to confirm a significant correlation between the variables ‘future work self’ and ‘career planning’ within both groups. In other words, students with clear visions of their future work have a better understanding of how to reach their career goals, regardless of nationality.

Implications for theory

Our research results extend beyond Taber and Blankemeyer’s (2014) findings regarding the relationship between ‘future work self’ and ‘proactive career behaviour’ by adding the influences of contextual factors to their model, as presented in Figure 1. In our research, key contextual factors, such as the unique Japanese recruiting system, the educational system, the way the universities operate and firm-level HR policies and practices (i.e. recruitment, training and skill development for new employees), all had a profound impact on the interplay between

‘future work self’ and ‘proactive career behaviour’. As Figure 1 demonstrates, we have divided the conceptual framework into three parts: Part I indicates the key elements of ‘future work self’ and the level and patterns of Japanese and international students’ awareness of it; Part II indicates the key elements of the contextual environments in Japan and the impact on students’ ‘proactive career behaviour’; and Part III provides the detailed elements of the overall outcomes and characteristics of students who have a high level of awareness of ‘future work self’.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Accordingly, our research provides further development beyond the conventional theoretical approaches in this area, which have demonstrated that individuals who are very clear about their future work and know exactly who and what they want to become in their future careers exhibit high levels of career self-management capabilities and strong proactive career behaviour (Jackson and Wilton 2017; Runhaar et al. 2019; Strauss et al. 2012; Taber and Blankemeyer 2014). Our research shows that due to the influence of a unique social/cultural norm, such as the unique recruiting and education systems in Japan, even graduates who have a strong awareness of ‘future work self’ may not develop certain key elements of career self-management capabilities (e.g., decision-making skills, transition learning and self-efficacy) or proactive skill development behaviour.

Conversely, once again, due to unique social and/or cultural norms, a high level of awareness of ‘future work self’ could lead individual graduates to actively engage in ‘career planning’ and ‘career networking’ behaviours because these activities are crucial for them to find potential employers and be accepted into future workplaces as new employees.

For example, when examining the relationship between ‘future work self’ and ‘proactive skill development and career networking’, we found a substantial difference between Japanese and international students. As discussed above, we believe the reason for this difference is that skill development prior to employment is not required in the Japanese recruiting system, whereas it leads to increased employability in other parts of the world. However, it is crucial for Japanese students to develop networks to gain information about employment as they start looking for employment during their third year of studies. Hence, Japanese students still think in terms of organisational careers and avoid making investments in their own skills and human capital, which would be required for a self-managed career.

Moreover, our research goes beyond the broad-level discussion presented by Bridgstock (2009) regarding the development of career self-management capabilities. In addition, we found that the Japanese students are generally passive with regard to developing career self-management capabilities due to the arranged recruitment system. Such a controlled environment can jeopardise students' intrinsic, i.e. interest-driven, and extrinsic, i.e. money-driven, motivations because they are often unable to select interesting and/or well-paying jobs. As entry-level employees, they are eligible for basic jobs as assistants under strict supervision, and entry-level salaries are relatively low across sectors due to the seniority system (Debroux 2016). These outcomes are very different from the findings in Jackson (2019) concerning graduates in Australia and the UK. The students in that study had strong career values (i.e. intrinsic and extrinsic motivations) that enhanced their proactivity in career self-management.

Therefore, this study makes an important complementary contribution towards the underpinning literature debate and empirical research by demonstrating that national, social and cultural contexts play an important role in forming proactive career behaviours in students.

The implications for policy and management practices

These findings have important implications for business and management practices, particularly with regard to the policies, companies' new practices and educational institutions' career services relevant to the career educations and employability of students. Regarding more detailed policy issues, both governments and educational institutions should develop clear policy guidance to support career advice services for students during their university studies. Given the challenges of global competition, the business community, in general, and Keidanren (i.e. Japan's leading business lobby group), in particular, have moved away from their traditional job-hunting schedules (Shibata 2019).

With the new guidelines emphasizing more diverse recruitment practices and autonomous career development, the implications for the business community and university graduates are significant. For the business community, these changes are rooted in Japan's low birth-rate and declining population. Companies are competing for a shrinking pool of prospective employees at the same time that foreign firms are offering higher salaries and faster career progression than their Japanese counterparts. Hence, Japanese companies have been forced to re-think and reform their current recruitment practices. For example, rather than listing

job descriptions and salaries in a traditional ‘shūkatsu’ job-hunting advertisement, more companies are instead focusing on searching for candidates that share their values and interests. Such dramatic changes also require university graduates to absorb new job-seeking mentalities and behaviours, such as prioritizing passions over following traditional societal rules, to find more fulfilling careers (Shibata, 2019).

In addition, the current situation is: on the one hand, employers seem not to require students to have particular skills other than those evidenced by their graduation; on the other hand, employers constantly claim that a large gap exists in young people’s skills upon their employment, particularly in the areas of problem-solving, leadership and creativity (QS 2019). Hence, certain actions must be taken by the relevant stakeholders. As described earlier, since the philosophy of the Japanese education system (i.e., what should be taught and how and for what purpose the learning process should be organised) was shaped by the current recruiting system, students’ acquisition of specific skills is not a priority for Japanese universities. Accordingly, the skills future employees receive upon employment are firm-specific skills and employers do not expect arriving employees to have these specific skills. However, employers require new employees to have non-firm-specific skills, such as problem-solving and creativity.

Therefore, Japanese universities need to offer more classes and courses that foster these skills as required by employers. Consequently, recent government policies have stressed the need to develop global human capital at Japanese universities, which, in turn, have increased their efforts to implement programmes to meet demand in the labour markets. However, these programmes are too few and are only open to a small number of selected students, so they are not keeping up with the growing demand among Japanese companies (Hennings 2017). This means that Japanese universities must further restructure their curricula and classes to offer programmes that can help students to develop non-firm-specific skills.

Better graduate outcomes also require more individual and tailor-made career counselling services (Tan 2013) to support students. These tailor-made services could be based on evaluations of their capabilities and passions regarding their future work selves and proactive career behaviours and followed by relevant and adequate advice. It would be especially meaningful to inform students about various career possibilities as well as help them to connect with potential employers and determine relevant career objectives. Furthermore, students should be made aware of employers’ expectations with regards to their skills upon employment

so that educational institutions' career counselling services can help their students develop these skills based on evaluations of their capabilities. These steps would help reduce the skill gap in Japan and avoid a mismatch between future graduates and their prospective employers.

Concluding remarks

This research has provided meaningful contributions to the development of a new framework by adding contextual factors to the interplay between 'future work self', 'proactive career behaviour' and possible outcomes. In addition, it has also highlighted a number of differences between this study and those conducted in Western countries as well as implications for policies and practices. Given the relatively small sample size and composition of our survey, these results are limited to the observed university and thus cannot be generalized to a wider population of new-generation employees. However, our data analysis indicated that the collected data was normal distributed and that there were no CMV, reliability or validity issues concerning our dataset. Therefore, we believe that our discussion on the implications for theory, policy and practices is well grounded. Our research results demonstrate that there is a significant difference between the career behaviours exhibited by Japanese and international students due to the different social and cultural contexts influencing 'future work self' and 'proactive career behaviour'. Hence, more cross-cultural comparative studies, particularly those matching international students to their countries of origin and different backgrounds, can enhance future research.

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Table 1: Principal components analysis results

	Item Loadings
Future Work Self (CR = .91, AVE = .68)	
The mental picture of my future is very clear.	.852
What type of future I want in relation to my work is very clear to me.	.836
I can easily imagine my Future Work Self.	.831
I am very clear about who and what I want to become in my future work.	.804
My future is very easy for me to imagine.	.796
Career Networking (CR = .97, AVE = .93)	
I am building a network of contacts to obtain information about how to get the job that I want.	.973
I am building a network of contacts I can call for advice on how to be successful in the job.	.961
Skill Development (CR = .92, AVE = .85)	
I am gaining experience in a variety of areas to increase my knowledge and skills.	.921
I am developing knowledge and skills in tasks critical to my future.	.920
Career Planning (CR = .74, AVE = .61)	
I haven't decided what my career objectives should be yet. (reversed)	.966
I know what I need to do to reach my career goal.	.526

Note: CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Explained

Table 2: ‘Future work selves’ and ‘proactive career behaviours’ among Japanese and international students (comparison of the distributions for the two groups)

	Japanese Students	International Students	Test Statistics	
	Mean	Mean	p-value	r-value
Future Work Self	3.09	3.05	.800	.02
Career Planning	2.99	3.17	.309	.09
Skill Development	3.27	3.65	.033	.19
Networking	2.86	3.17	.098	.14

Table 3: Regression analysis for ‘future work selves’ and ‘proactive career behaviours’ among Japanese and international students (comparison)

	Career Planning			Skill Development			Networking		
	β	t	R ²	β	t	R ²	β	t	R ²
Future Work Self Japanese Students	.55***	5.5	.31	.25**	2.1	.06	.42***	3.8	.18
Future Work Self International Students	.70***	7.5	.49	.43***	3.7	.19	.29**	2.3	.09

*** p<0.001 ** p<0.05

Figure 1: Contextual factors influencing ‘future work selves’ and ‘proactive career behaviours’

