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"Is there a Plan B? How transitioning students at Japanese universities perceive risks in working life and how they plan to manage them"

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For Japanese youth, significant 'new risks' have emerged since the deep recession of the 1990s that led to an increase in unemployment and irregular work. This account traces the landscape of such new social risks and then examines the risk perceptions of students at two private universities in Japan (one of which is highly prestigious and another which ranks lower). What anxieties do students harbour over their transitions into working lives, and are they concerned over the volatility of the labour markets? Furthermore, who do they plan to rely on in times of work-related hardship? While still a preliminary account, this paper identifies important patterns relating to how students plan to balance work and family duties and how aware – or unaware – they are of formal employment support and consultation measures.

Keywords: School-to-work transition, Japan, youth, new risks, irregular work, work-life balance, *kakusa shakai*, 'NEETs'

1. Introduction

This account is concerned with the 'new risks' that students at Japanese universities face in the process of transitioning into working lives. More precisely, it surveys the changing landscape of work-related risks and then investigates the *perceptions* of third year university students regarding such risks. In addition, the paper also inquires into students' *coping strategies*, i.e. into how they plan to pre-empt, alleviate or accommodate the particular risks they foresee. It is such a focus on risk that sets this paper apart from the more standard 'job-seeking awareness' surveys (*shūshoku ishiki chōsa*) frequently produced in Japan as well as from the overwhelming majority of English-language publications on Japanese youth labour and social policy issues.

Building on Peter Taylor-Gooby's more general definition (Taylor-Gooby 2004), in this paper we loosely define 'new risks' as those risks that youth in Japan face during their transitions into working lives as a result of the large socio-economic changes since

the 1990s recession. Though in the literature on new risks it is 'post-industrial society' that is typically designated as the relevant backdrop, in Japan's case it is appropriate to focus specifically on the risk landscape from the late 1990s onwards. It is in this period that Japan's employment system underwent a massive transformation from comparatively stable, long-term employment relations as the norm to a drastic proliferation of irregular employment and competitive working practices. Arguably – and in agreement with the bulk of the literature on new risks – this wave of change has most powerfully impinged on youth whose careers are now much more likely to comprise frequent job changes and insecure labour, including short-term contract jobs, than the careers of their parents' generation. The early 2000s, furthermore, saw unprecedented levels of youth unemployment, which prompted the government to enact some new measures both for job-seeking students as well as for formally inactive youth identified as 'NEETs' (15 to 34 year olds 'not in education, employment or training').

Although 'youth' are all too often treated by commentators and social scientists as if they were a monolithic group, the changes described above have, quite clearly, not impacted on all young adults with equal strength: those with robust family resources, higher educational qualifications and social networks (of personal friends and seniors, for example) are likely to be in a relatively advantageous position even in the new context. Moreover, *gender* remains an absolutely crucial dimension when discussing risks related to establishing careers and families in 21st century Japan: women and men continue to hold rather different ideals and face different expectations (Brinton 1989). Hence, since it may logically be assumed that also risk *perceptions* differ across different layers of youth, we have chosen to conduct qualitative, holistic interviews with a total of 38 students at an elite private university *as well as* at another institution of relatively low rank (both located in Kyoto). By having two sample groups that are ostensibly similar (as university students in the same year and enrolled in a similar major course) but on different rungs of the academic and social hierarchy, we are able to make telling comparisons and therefore stand a better chance of grasping a wider range of risk perceptions and risk management strategies among Japanese university students.

Our paper has three main aims: the first is to clarify, with an international readership in mind, the critical *context* for the 'new risks' impinging on youth in Japan. We do this by surveying changes in the employment system (including the growth of irregular work); trends in intimate human relationships; the emergence of the socially excluded 'NEETs' as a social problem; and the enactment of new youth policy initiatives. In addition, we briefly survey dominant media discourses such as the widespread debate on 'disparities' (*kakusa*). Our second aim is to explore the risk perceptions of students at

the two universities in Kyoto. We ask: What are the pressing anxieties of these third-year undergraduates as they seek jobs and a stable income, and as they, in many cases, aspire to build careers and families? Thirdly, we pay special attention to an aspect of risk perceptions that is rarely directly investigated in Japan: the students' risk management strategies. While 'intentions' may sometimes be a more appropriate term to use, we are concerned here with *alternative paths* – possible 'plan Bs' – as well as the *social and institutional resources* students plan to draw on in the event of work-related challenges such as the inability to land a desired job, labour rights violations or poor working conditions, work-family conflicts, and mental health ailments. Have the respondents given thought to such potential risks, and, if faced with hardships, do they intend to rely on the support of intimate relationships, wider networks, or professional institutions?

The structure of our paper follows the above agenda, with section two devoted to the emergence of 'new risks' as well as their context, and section three presenting an analysis of our interviews. Risk management strategies are discussed throughout where relevant. We end by recapitulating our key findings and by suggesting that *career education* could act as one plausible way for tackling the new risks faced by a range of youth in Japan today.

1.1. Theoretical assumptions and working hypotheses

Although in designing our interview survey and in writing this account we have strived to minimise author bias, we make a couple of central assumptions that should be acknowledged here. First, we adopt a sociological approach to the study of risk that affirms the social embeddedness of knowledge, including that on risk. Therefore, our purpose is not, in section two, to attempt to provide an 'objective' overview of risks that youth face and then scrutinise the views of the youth in light of that overview. Instead, we wish to merely set out some of the key coordinates of change and highlight some issues – such as irregular work and non-employment – that are widely perceived problematic in the Japanese society, but that may not be viewed as 'risks' by all youth alike.

That said, our survey focuses on 'work-related risks' and inquires the respondents mainly about their job-seeking activities, support-seeking tendencies and longer-term plans as well as concerns. We have tried not to pre-specify what counts as a 'risk' and what does not, but, for example, where a responded said he/she wished to find a full-time job and have a family, the likelihood of not being able to reach such desired

goals and fulfil attendant social needs is interpreted by us as a 'risk'. In any case, we acknowledge that, depending on the specific context and the values of the particular individual, what is viewed as a risk may vary greatly.

The present study relies primarily on qualitative data and does not attempt to generate findings that are representative of all university students in Japan. Rather, the aim is to explore students' risk perceptions and strategies in an open-ended fashion, discerning important *patterns* and *relationships* that would be missed by quantitative studies (or that are not picked up by existing quantitative surveys). Another goal is to tentatively propose new mechanisms based on our interview data and identify viable hypotheses for more extensive research in the future.

2. The changing risk landscape for transitioning university students

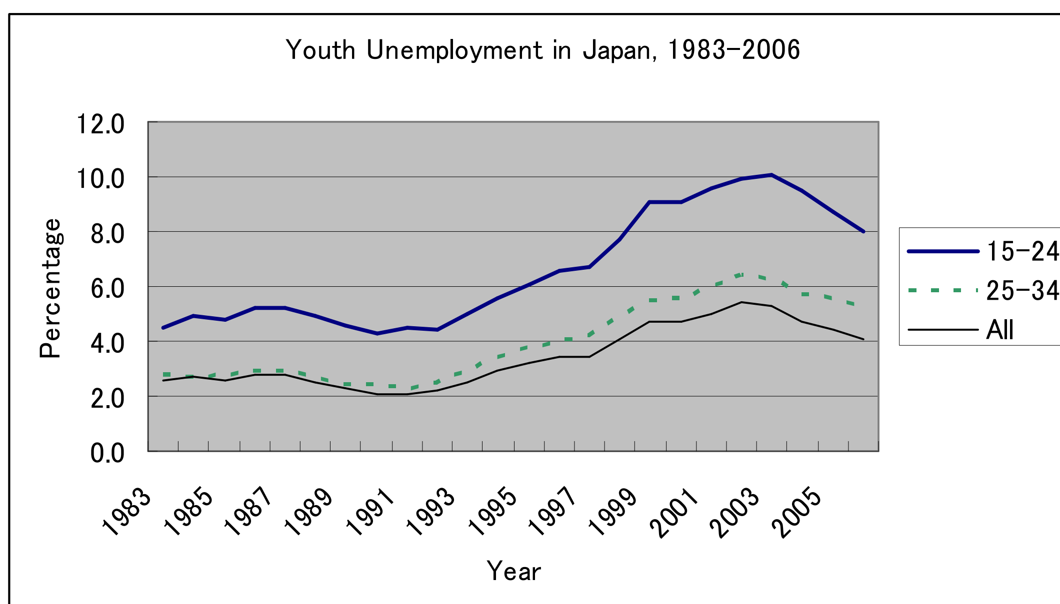
A well-known peculiarity of Japan is the system of lifetime employment. Within this configuration, once a person is employed by a certain company, it is expected that he or she will work for the same firm until retirement. Dismissal is made difficult by regulation and regular full-time workers are thus well-protected. Under this system, switching jobs is not common and indeed not very clever a choice: it is not the skill or effort of a person that determines his or her salary, but how long that person works for the same workplace. Typically, companies with a lifetime employment system employ new graduates all at once and only very seldom conduct mid-career recruitment.

For this reason, making a successful transition to a job has usually been a one-shot affair available only for fresh graduates. Called the *ikkatsu saiyō seido* in Japanese, this practice has meant that for those who have failed to find desirable employment at graduation, building a good career has been extremely difficult. If a young job-seeker misses his or her chance to enter a large company – the preferred option for most middle-class youth – he or she will is likely to end up working for a small or middle-sized company. From there it is almost impossible to get transferred to a higher-paid job in a large firm. The same has come to apply to form of employment for both men and women: for those who have once taken up irregular work, it is hard to move into a regular job. Hence, for the majority of students, finding a permanent job at a good company by graduation has been particularly important in Japan over the past four to five decades.

As is by now widely understood, the system of lifetime employment (that comprised *ikkatsu saiyō*) worked quite well during the period of high or moderate economic growth, but turned dysfunctional after the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s

which led to a major job crunch. This caused not only an expansion of unemployment but also a tremendous proliferation of irregular work. The rate of increase in unemployment and irregular work was far greater for youth than the elderly (Figure 1). This was because companies cut down on the recruiting of new permanent workers – replacing them with irregulars – while dismissing comparatively few regular employees who remained under the wing of the lifetime employment system (Genda 2001). This resulted in a major expansion of unemployment and irregular jobs among young adults. Those with few qualifications and no tertiary education were worst affected, but the recruitment of university students was significantly reduced also.

Figure 1. Trends in youth unemployment in Japan between 1983 and 2006.



Source: Statistics Bureau (2007).

So to sum up, the transition from school to working life used to be a rather smooth, standardised process in post-war Japan but became a risky matter during the recession of the 1990s. The period falling in between 1992 to 2005 was especially bad in terms of fresh graduates' employment. In recognition of the severe effects of dire employment opportunities on a large age-group, students who graduated in this period were later dubbed the Lost Generation. A significant share such lost generation youth became part-time workers or 'NEETs' and it is still very hard for them to find regular, secure jobs. Employment for graduates has improved from 2006 together with the recovery of the economy, and hence for those who finished their studies between 2006 and 2008 the labour markets looked relatively bright.

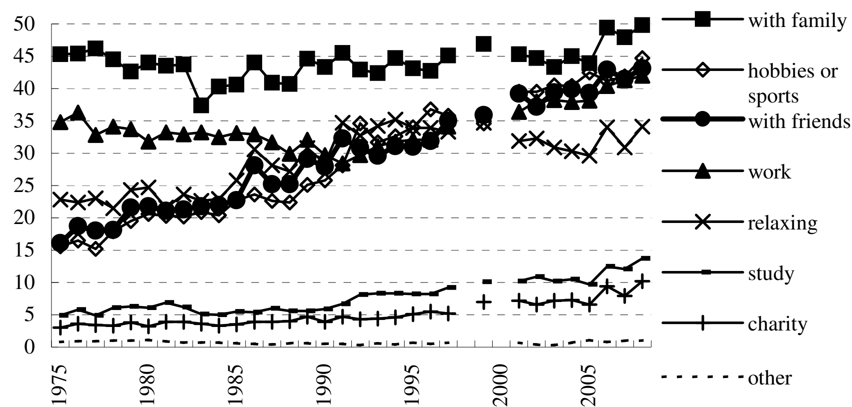
However, due to the global financial crisis that emerged in 2007 and led to a recession in Japan in late 2008, it is clear that recruitment will become reduced once again. It is thus expected that students planning to enter the job markets in 2009 will face particular hardships. All of our interviewees belong to this batch and we will later find that most of them are highly aware of shifts in the economy and the job supply.

2.2. Intimate risks

In addition to labour market insecurities, changes in intimate relationships are another integral part of the landscape of 'new risks' for youth in Japan. Indeed, recent literature on youth in modern Japan argues that having friends is one of the most crucial conditions if one is to avoid being neglected and wants to live a stable life in a given community (Asano 2006; Doi 2008; Iwata 2006; Tsuji 1999). Most authors in this line of research claim that this is because – owing to the modernisation of Japanese society – common values are turning so unstable and variable that youth must actively avoid the risk of conflict with others and, to this end, they are required to constantly communicate with others in the community. This argument implicitly based on David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) in which it is argued that, as industry and economy shift from material-based to service-based, people will become more communication-oriented. In accordance with this hypothesis, with the growth the service sector in Japan, the importance of 'friends' is becoming increasingly higher over the past three decades (Figure 2). Since the importance of family (for a person's sense of fulfilment) appears steady or even increasing, this trend may not be due to shrinking average family size but due to an overall shift towards a more 'communication-oriented' society. However, the fact that the average age at first marriage has risen to around 30 for both men and women – who potentially have more time to share with friends instead – may also have to do with this trend.

Assuming such a communication and friends-oriented situation, youth face more risks from losing friends in a community which is something we refer in this paper as 'intimate risks'. Especially when they move residence for employment-related reasons, they have to adapt to a new a community where the may or may not make new friends. It is at such junctures where intimate risk may become the greatest.

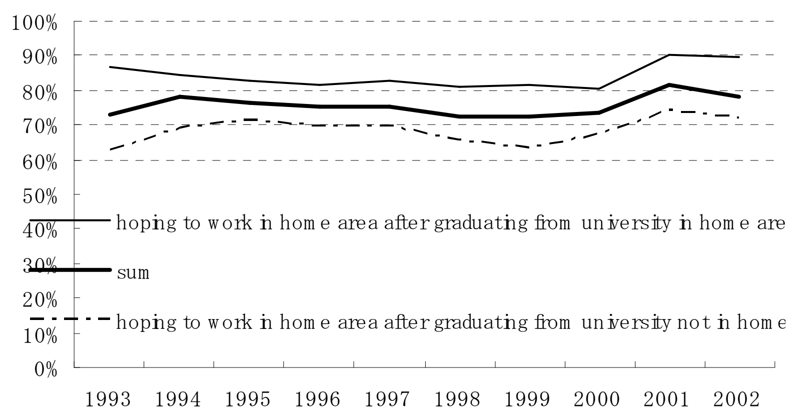
Figure 2. Situations where Japanese people feel, "I am living a fulfilling life" (% of "Yes")



Data from polls by Japanese Government (Naikaku-fu Daijin-kanbou Seifu-kouhou-shitsu 2008)

What do university students, then, think about the prospect of moving to a new place after a job? Existing studies have suggested that those who hope to take up a job in or near their hometown (a group that ha slightly increased since the 2000s as shown in Figure 3) tend to have high 'family obligation' and low 'working motivation' (Hirao and Shigematsu 2006; Satou 2005); they also tend to like their hometown and wish to land a relatively stable job e.g. in the catering industry or civil service (Mainichi Communications 2002). These studies, however, have not explicitly addressed intimate risks. Based on our interviews, the present account thus strives to gain some insight into whether university students consider such intimate risks at all.

Figure 3. The proportion of university students (except for those in Tokyo) who hope to find work in their home area.



Source: Surveys by Mainichi Communications (2002)

2.3. The risk of becoming a 'NEET' and new youth support measures

In 2003, the new target group category of 'NEET' entered the Japanese labour and social policy vocabulary. Noting an increase in non-employed youth in the wake of the 1990s recession, academics and researchers affiliated with the Japan Institute of Labour Policy and Training imported this term from the UK and in the process redefined it to (in their view) suit the circumstances in Japan. Customised so as to include all 15 to 34 year olds 'not in education, employment or training', 'NEET' was used strategically by policy actors to focus attention on a previously neglected layer of youth so as to pave the way for novel support measures (Toivonen 2008).[1] However, 'NEET' also entered colloquial Japanese (as *nīto*) through rampant and largely negative media reporting on youth who 'lacked work motivation' and were therefore to be disparaged. This introduced an important dynamic that continues to impinge on actual support policies, but in any case, the new focus on 'NEETs' signifies a growing concern with the *social exclusion* of young adults in post-bubble era Japan.

In terms of numbers, those in the broad 'NEET' category added up to 640,000 in 2005, comprising just under two percent of the 15 to 34 age group in this year (Higuchi 2007). According to the Employment Status Survey of 2002, the bulk of formally inactive youth were junior high school or high school graduates with only 12.5 per cent possessing a college degree (Genda 2007:29). Hence, it would appear that university students – faring relatively well in the labour markets and having relatively prosperous families – are not in the highest risk group in terms of becoming a 'NEET'.

To be sure, being in the 'NEET' category can and should not be equated with being socially excluded or disadvantaged: it has been amply demonstrated that the majority of 'informally inactive' youth are in actuality quite active, and that they have good reasons for not being in education or employment (Honda, Naitō and Gotō 2006). Moreover, formal employment or education is no guarantee of 'social inclusion' or the absence of social risks in a society where precarious employment is rapidly proliferating. However, during his fieldwork (2007-2008), Toivonen found that there is indeed a subset of 'NEETs' who face particularly dire circumstances, often due to mental illness, unrecognised disabilities and family strife. Such youth face exceedingly difficult times in an environment that requires a high level of communication skills and 'instant work competence' (*sokusenryoku*) of those who have not been employed at graduation. So

[1] This crucial *strategic* element of the 'NEET' category has been completely missed by outside observers such as Lunsing (2008) as well as by key scholars in Japan such as Honda Yuki who have focused more on discourse than policy practice (Honda, Naitō and Gotō 2006).

even for university students, the risk of social exclusion is real where they suffer from mental health issues or have poor family resources and scarce networks, and where they fail to locate jobs at graduation. This risk grows during economic downturns and reductions in hiring, although comparatively less than for those with no college degree. Significant additional risks may follow from *stigmatisation* even where a youth is otherwise relatively well-off: to live as a 'NEET' is seen in an extremely negative light by mainstream society and thus may impose a psychological burden on formally inactive young adults.

Even amid such confusion regarding the portrayal of 'NEETs' and the problems faced by this group, a new support infrastructure to assist at-risk youth emerged in Japan between 2005 and 2008. The first actual programme that appeared was the so-called Youth Independence Camp (2005) – a communal training and living programme – which was followed soon by a counselling centre dubbed the Youth Support Station (2006). The latter has a wider remit and reach since it is tasked with building local youth support networks that link up various resources (including the employment services, medical clinics and voluntary organisations). These initiatives provide counselling, peer support and limited training, but no cash benefits as of yet. In this sense, they are not 'work-to-welfare' programmes but nevertheless have the same aim of integrating formally inactive young adults into the labour markets. Both of the aforementioned initiatives can also be viewed as 'family policies' since they actively liaise with parents in addition to their (often socially withdrawn) offspring, hoping to support the latter to establish independent lives.

Since the effectiveness of any support policy depends first of all on whether it reaches its potential clients, it is interesting to investigate whether university students are aware of existing support initiatives at all. In addition to the abovementioned Youth Independence Camps and Youth Support Stations, young adults in Japan may consult the 100 or so Job Cafés that offer job brokering and related counselling free of charge. The public Hello Work employment offices, although not especially targeted at youth, offer the same general services. There are also several public labour offices in each prefecture that provide guidance and protection in matters related to employment conditions and labour law. On the other hand, mental health counselling is not covered by the National Health Insurance and may be hard to access when it is not provided by one's employer or educational institution.

2.4. The kakusa *debate and other media discourses*

During the period of economic growth (until the burst of the bubble in early 1990s), most Japanese people did not give much thought to issues of disparity. In fact, they thought their society is one where all belong to the 'middle class' (Murakami 1984). After entering the recession period, however, media discussions on the so-called *kakusa shakai* ('disparity society') increased tremendously. Because of the Japanese *ikkatsu-saiyō* system and lifetime employment with relatively strong dismissal regulation, the foremost victims of the job crunch came from graduating youth. In retrospect, the interesting thing was that, at least until 2000, youth unemployment and inactivity were seen mainly as the result of young people's free and easy attitudes towards work. Attitudes were also given as the main explanation for the increasing share of youth in irregular jobs and the 'NEET' category. In other words, mainstream media argued consistently that young people were responsible for their own unemployment. It was only after the 'lost generation' view became popular that youth employment problems came to be widely associated with the economic recession. These social perceptions that were built mainly by media may influence the consciousness of youth people. Some of them understand the dynamics and obstacles presented by the labour markets, but others view the failure to find a job solely as a personal responsibility (*jiko sekinin*), not as a social problem

As Brinton (2008) points out, the Japanese labour market is controlled by institutions (and institutional social capital), not by personal connections. At high schools, there is a job placement officer who determines the initial job of a student. As for university students, companies provide standardized application processes and there is almost no room for the exploitation of personal connections. Students in the job market, therefore, do not place much importance on personal connections during their job-seeking activities. But that does not necessarily mean that personal networks are completely without a role. Young students may turn to friends, seniors or their families for information on particular jobs and for support of various kinds.

3. The risk perceptions of two groups of university students in Kyoto

This section explores the perceptions of two groups of university students regarding risks related to working life. We interviewed altogether 38 students using a pre-designed survey consisting of 33 items. The purpose of this survey was to generate open-ended answers and contextually rich data on the aspirations and anxieties of third-year

undergraduate students in the process of transitioning from university to work. What we present here is an initial overview and analysis of the responses, focusing on the students' immediate concerns regarding their job-seeking activities; aspirations and anxieties regarding their longer-term future; support-seeking tendencies at times of distress and work-related hardship; and their views on geographical mobility and intimate risks. It should be stressed though that, with each interview lasting approximately 30 minutes, the amount of data generated was such that we plan to conduct a second, closer analysis when revising the present account (drawing on the comments we receive in the meantime).

Our choice of universities requires some explanation. The original idea, as stated in the Introduction, was to make sure our interviews could illustrate a broad *range* of risk perceptions so as to avoid portraying 'new risks' as impinging on different layers of Japanese society in a uniform fashion. We found that a way to operationalise this idea was to choose students who were taking similar majors at two universities of different rank. Although no official, comprehensive rankings of universities are published in Japan, there is a high awareness of university rank in general, based the historical success and prestige of particular institutions, their performance in terms of student employment and entrance examination difficulty level. Taking the last of these measures, the Department of Sociology at Ritsumeikan University (where half of our interviewees studied at) was ranked 6th from the top among private liberal arts departments in 2008 (Yoyogi Zeminaaru 2008). By contrast, the Department of Humanities at Kyoto Seika University was 45th on the same ranking list, situated therefore in the lower middle range of liberal arts departments. We took this vast difference in prestige and ranking as a proxy for the class and academic backgrounds of the students in our survey.

3.1. The sample and the survey

All of our interviewees were recruited through personal contacts at both of the chosen universities. Here, two instructors were in a key role and they asked students if they would like to take part in the survey. As the survey was fully voluntary, those who were busy or otherwise reluctant to cooperate were excluded from the sample. All respondents were third-year students at the Deparment of Social Sciences at Ritsumeikan University and the Department of Humanities of Kyoto Seika University. The former had 4500 students in 2008 out of which 53 per cent were female, while the latter had 1000 students of which as many as 80 per cent were women (overall, Ritsumeikan University has 33000 students who are 64 per cent male whereas Kyoto

Seika University enrols 4000 students out of which only 38 per cent are male).

We conducted 38 interviews in total: 21 at Ritsumeikan University and 17 at Kyoto Seika University. Female interviewees numbered 13 at the former and 12 at the latter. That the females comprised a majority in our sample relates to the high representation of females at the students' respective departments as enumerated above. Only two of the respondents were non-Japanese, both at Kyoto Seika University. The average duration of an individual interview was 30 minutes: all were carried out in Japanese by the authors and two assistants, and they were subsequently transcribed verbatim and transferred onto NVivo for analysis.

When recruiting the students, we called our survey a 'job-seeking awareness survey' in order not to 'prime' the respondents to think solely about risks. At the beginning of each interview, we furthermore stated that we wished to hear about the students' hopes *and* anxieties regarding their future working lives. Crucially, instead of employing the term 'risk' (*risuku*) – which is a loan word from English the use of which is not common in Japanese everyday speech – we opted for inquiring the students about their 'anxieties', or *fuan* (不安). *Fuan* is very commonly used in regular speech and it can also mean feeling insecure, worried or uneasy; we thus found it the most readily comprehensible word to employ in our survey.

Furthermore, the timing of our survey – the first week of December in 2008 – was highly consequential: at this time, the respondents were approaching the end of their third year as undergraduates and were generally expected to have started their job-seeking activities (or at least to have started considering different opportunities). Had we interviewed second-year students, the issue of job-seeking would most likely not have been very relevant to the respondents yet; conversely, fourth-year students would have been so close to graduation that the majority of them would already have made final decisions about their next step. So interviewing third-year students was an ideal way to inquire about risk perceptions regarding immediate job-seeking concerns as well as long-term anxieties. It should moreover be added that, at the time of our interviews, the global financial crisis was already in full swing and discouraging news regarding hiring were in wide circulation.

Table 1 provides an overview of the responses to our main interview questions.

Table 1. A summary of the interview responses.

	Rits Univ.	Seika Univ.
Female	14	13
Male	7	6
Occupation of household earner	/21	/19
- Large company	5	7
- Size-unidentified company	4	2
- Middle or small company	3	3
- Self-employed	4	3
- Civil officer	5	4
- Unidentified	1	1
Company size orientation	/21	/19
- Large company	17	3
- Size unspecified	3	16
- Middle or small company	1	0
Working in or near hometown	3	3
Working orientation	/21	/19
About irregular employment		
- Finding regular employment	20/21	18/19
- Worrying about possibly becoming an irregular employee	7/21	8/19
Persons to ask help in trouble (multiple answer is OK)		
- Family members	11	15
- Friends or ex-seniors	14	13
- Superiors, seniors or colleagues in the workplace	5	8
- Lover	3	1

3.2. Immediate anxieties: finding a good job

As explained above, since our interviewees were third-year students, their most immediate concern in the majority of cases was to find desirable employment to move into after graduation. In the case of Ritsumeikan, the most popular ‘ideal jobs’ were those at large manufacturers, mass media corporations, trading companies and in finance. Very few had a specific job or occupation in mind – the exceptions were one student who wanted to become a financial planner and another who wanted to create sounds for computer games – and most thought in terms of company or industry type. Some had decided though that they wanted to be involved in marketing or sales. Most students clearly remained open to many possible options and avoided clearly defining

their 'dream jobs'. For one student, this was a source of anxiety as she puzzled whether to send out dozens or even hundreds of applications, or alternatively channel all her efforts into a narrower goal.

Over half of the respondents expressed worries regarding the worsening employment situation at the time, citing the 'Lehman shock', *naitei torikeshi* (cancellations of informally promised positions at companies), and an impending employment 'Ice Age'. In addition to common concerns about whether they could actually land a job and whether their expectations would be borne out by reality, there was a clear pattern where female students were anxious regarding whether they could manage in a male-dominated sector (e.g. trade companies) and whether they could balance their work and family duties in the future (we will return to this topic again below). Although few of the interviewees discussed their explicit 'risk management strategies' in length, it appears that at the stage of job-searching, most strived to minimise risks by keeping an open view and by applying for a wide range of jobs as long as they were at relatively well-known companies.

While Ritsumeikan students were on the whole rather upbeat and confident about their future employment prospects, over a third of the Kyoto Seika University students we interviewed stated directly that they were *at a loss regarding how to go about looking for jobs*. In other words, they felt they had little knowledge on the concrete steps required during job-seeking activities. Furthermore, a similar share lacked *confidence* regarding their ability to find a job at all, citing the fact that they studied at a low-ranking university as one major connected reason. They, too, were concerned of the worsening employment situation, but compared to Ritsumeikan students, the sense of anxiety the Seika students felt appeared much more tangible and acute. Some did aim to enter sectors such as mass media (including TV programme and videogame production and events management) which they feared were fiercely competitive, but over a half were thinking of customer service jobs and retailing where employment tends to be more precarious and low-paid. In contrast with students at Ritsumeikan, there were only three respondents who placed stress on finding work with a large corporation: the rest did not find this all that important.

3.3. The longer term: 'valuing' the family in different ways

The questions we asked regarding how the students saw themselves in ten years' time and how they planned to balance work and family duties yielded telling results. First, 11 out of the 13 female students who we interviewed at Ritsumeikan University insisted

that they wished to get married over the coming ten years, whereas for male students, most wanted to get married but only in their 30s after they had built their careers. Revealing a striking contrast, at Kyoto Seika University, only 50 per cent of the female respondents expressed that they were keen to marry; the remaining half either gave ambiguous answers or did not believe in their marriage chances. The male students at Seika were, on the average, even less interested in matrimony.

In both groups, only two to three of the women voiced their intentions to become ambitious 'career women', but on the whole, the females at Ritsumeikan were highly keen to find a viable way to combine paid work with family duties. The women at Seika, on the other hand, doubted that they were smart or 'agile' enough to handle both paid employment and domestic work at the same time. The concrete ways in which the female respondents at Ritsumeikan planned to achieve a desired work-life balance consisted essentially of working for a company with a good family leave system; of finding an 'understanding' partner; and of possibly quitting at child-birth and seeking another job later (if that seemed necessary). Nevertheless, while clear about their hopes and ideals, few were absolutely confident that they could realise their plans, with one interviewee commenting as follows:

> I think that, for the most part, I will try my best to manage both work and family. However, I'm sure it will be tough…You know, working and then returning home to do the housework and to wash the dishes, both being a type of work, it'll be tough because that means I'll be working practically all the time…
>
> -- *Will you coordinate these tasks with your partner?*
> I would like very much to do so, but I suspect *there are only few men in today's Japan who are willing to cooperate on such things*. So if I have a child, I may choose a short-hours job or a company that allows for that.

This kind of (apparent) mismatch characterised the responses of females at both Ritsumeikan and Seika, with women at the latter university more willing to compromise their jobs and expected to find only 'traditionally-minded' husbands; the latter group was also more likely to avoid marriage altogether.

It should be added that the notions of work-life balance and 'taking care of the family' meant starkly different things for the female and male respondents. Whereas women were willing to both work and adopt responsibility for their children's well-being, men planned to look after their families by working hard and by spending

part of the weekend with their children. The male interviewees had clearly thought about work-life balance strategies much less than their female course mates, but their responses nevertheless expressed this overall disposition.

3.4. Seeking support when in distress: family and friends over public services

Interested in the students' support-seeking tendencies, we asked about who they would turn to in times of work-related distress and about whether they were aware of any professional institutions (*sōdan dekisōna senmon kikan*) that they could imagine consulting when facing difficulties once in working life. The reactions to the first question were rather uniform, with over half at both universities saying they would turn to either their families, friends or to both families and friends for support. As many as half of the students at Seika, however, also planned to consult their superiors, seniors or colleagues at their future place of work. The responses to the second item were far more surprising: while 10 out of 21 at Ritsumeikan admitted they knew of no professional support institutions, at Kyoto Seika University, *none* of the students said they were aware of such institutions. Three did indicate that they might search for some if they encountered a serious problem, but another four expressed negative feelings regarding the consulting of formal institutions about work-related hardships. Seven out of the 21 Ritsumeikan respondents mentioned labour unions as a possible source of support and three thought they might use the services of counsellors hired by their companies. The response of one Ritsumeikan male student is illustrative of our interviewees' reactions:

> Well, it's really more like I will be consulted by my employer. What, you mean that there are places that you can consult regarding work? I think that I'll manage alone somehow, by myself.

So despite the recent proliferation of employment-related support services for youth and a national network of labour consultation offices, university students appear largely unaware of such institutions. The responses further reveal that many may feel uncomfortable about sharing their problems with 'strangers', i.e. counsellors who they are not acquainted with on a personal level. The more simple explanation may however be that students are not taught about employment-related services at school, in their communities, or at university. This is understandable considering the newness of many support initiatives and may change in the near future.

3.5. Mobility and 'intimate risks'

In this subsection, we investigate whether or not those who hope to take a job in or near their hometown think of intimate risk, and if they do, how they think of it. We will find that some of them think of intimate risk and intimate risk and there can be a trade-off between high working motivation and intimate risk. The following excerpt of a female student at Kyoto Seika University (who lives alone but is from the adjacent Shiga prefecture where her mother lives) illustrates this:

> If I could, I want to go back to my hometown. […] I don't want to go to Tokyo very much.
> -- *Why?*
> Because there are many people in Tokyo, some of them being good and other being bad. I'm afraid of it. Since I had lived in countryside, I'm not accustomed to such a crowded place.[2]

This interviewee has to succeed her family and intends to be a housewife in the end. So, she is in the conditions which existing studies pointed out, such as 'high family obligation' and 'low working motivation' (Hirao and Shigematsu 2006; Satou 2005). However, her first answer about the motivation of working in her hometown was not about such conditions. Instead, her first answer was about *social risk* of living in urban or crowded cities like Tokyo. This case suggests that social risk can be the primary motivation of working in his/her hometown even though a student is in the conditions of 'high family obligation' or 'low working motivation'.

Then, what is social risk can be like concretely? The next interview – of a 20-year-old male at the same university but living with his parents in Kyoto – is suggestive:

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[2] Details: If I could, I want to go back to my hometown. My hope is to take a job where I can commute from my parent's home. Of course, I will have to go any place if no company in my hometown employs me, you know… But, I don't want to go to Tokyo very much.
-- Why?
Because there are many people in Tokyo, some of them being good and other being bad. I'm afraid of it. Since I had lived in countryside, I'm not accustomed to such a crowded place.
-- Why do you want to live in your parent's home?
I became bored with living alone at length, and I have to succeed my family ("*ie*" in Japanese) because of being the only child of my parent. My parent strongly asks me to come back to her home. So, I think that I might have to go back.
-- How about the vision after 10 years?
I will be a housewife. I intend to leave the job at my mid-twenties. After marriage, I'll leave it. As my hope, I don't want to be working in my thirties.

> -- *What kind of job do you want to take?*
> I have no idea yet, well…
> -- *How about the place to work?*
> I want to work in Kyoto or Osaka, or in Kansai area, you know.
> -- *Don't you want to go to Tokyo?*
> Not very much.
> -- *Is it because there are close friends or family in your hometown?*
> Yes.
> -- *In working, if some problem occurs, who will you ask for help?*
> […] I have few friends, but, in my hometown, I have just one friend who has been very close to me for a long time. So, I can talk with him.[3]

This interviewee has 'low working motivation'. So, he is in the condition to hope to work in or near his hometown. However, in his consciousness, the motivation of working in or near his hometown is attributed not to 'low working motivation' but to the social risk of *losing close friends in a community where he will live and work.*

The development of traffic and commerce in rural areas is though to have enabled rural people to live nearly as conveniently as in urban areas. This development will decrease the disadvantage of living in rural areas and relatively increase the disadvantage of taking the risk of leaving one's hometown (*e.g.* losing close friends in the community to live in). This is "intimate risk" we defined before.

This intimate risk, however, can be taken in order to get a bigger chance for his/her hope if a student is in 'high working motivation'. The next two interviewees talk about this:

> *[21 year old female at Ritsumeikan from Osaka prefecture,, living alone, hoping to enter cosmetic or commodity manufacturing companies]*
> I had thought, "I absolutely don't want to go to Tokyo." Since I'm from Osaka,

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[3] Details: -- What kind of job do you want to take?
I have no idea yet, well…
-- How about the place to work?
I want to work in Kyoto or Osaka, or in Kansai area, you know.
-- Don't you want to go to Tokyo?
Not very much.
-- Is it because there are close friends or family in your hometown?
Yes.
-- In working, if some problem occurs, who will you ask for help?
My parents, family, and girlfriend and so on.
-- Any other person?
I have few friends, but, in my hometown, I have just one friend who has been very close to me for a long time. So, I can talk with him.

> had lived in Kyoto, and had not moved out of Kansai area, I had thought, "I cannot go to such a place (like Tokyo)." But, […] one of them told me that, " […] if you want to get greater job and to hold your hope to become upper, the place of Tokyo is still full of big chances." […] I, after listening to the talks, came to think that, if companies I want to enter are only in Tokyo, I may as well go to Tokyo.[4]
>
> *[21 year old female student at Seika, living in her parents' home in Shiga prefecture, hoping to enter event companies or mass media companies]*
> As for the place to live and work, I thought that, if I narrow it, I couldn't enter any company. […] In essence, I want to hope to work in Kansai area, because it is near to my home. But, it is worse to me that I cannot do what I want to do when I narrow the work place to Kansai area (than that I live and work in Kansai area). So, I think that, if I have to go to areas other than Kansai, I will go there.[5]

These two interviewees have concrete hope about working and think positive about going far from their hometown, or taking intimate risk (of losing close friends in a community where they live and work), aiming to get more and bigger chances for their hope, although they, in essence, want to stay in or near their hometown avoiding intimate risk.

For Japanese university students who hope to work in or near their hometown, there can be a trade-off between 'high working motivation' and 'intimate risk'. When the power of ideals of working becomes weak among Japanese youth, their perception of intimate risk can become stronger.

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4 Details: When I listened to the talk about Tokyo, my mind became supple, you know, although I had thought, "I absolutely don't want to go to Tokyo." Since I'm from Osaka, had lived in Kyoto, and had not moved out of Kansai area, I had thought, "I cannot go to such a place (like Tokyo)." But, when I listened, by various chances, to the talks (about Tokyo) by the person of the company (Recruit) and by persons working in companies in Tokyo, who were not acquaintances at all, one of them told me that, "The place where information gathers first is still Tokyo. So, if you want to get greater job and to hold your hope to become upper, the place of Tokyo is still full of big chances." Though I had stuck at living in Osaka or Kansai area, I, after listening to the talks, came to think that, if companies I want to enter are only in Tokyo, I may as well go to Tokyo.

5 Details: As for the place to live and work, I thought that, if I narrow it, I couldn't enter any company. So, I am willing to go anywhere in Japan. For the moment, I am thinking as much as, if I pass the entrance exam of any company, I will enter the company. In essence, I want to hope to work in Kansai area, because it is near to my home. But, it is worse to me that I cannot do what I want to do when I narrow the work place to Kansai area (than that I live and work in Kansai area). So, I think that, if I have to go to areas other than Kansai, I will go there.

3.6. Perceptions about irregular employment

As table 1 shows, 20 (of 21) Ritsumeikan students and 18 (of 19) Seika students primarily wished to find *regular* employment, and, among them, seven Ritsumeikan students and eight Seika students said that they were actually worried about possibly becoming irregular employees. When asked, students expressed the view that irregular employment was less stable and associated a higher risk of unemployment with irregular employment than regular employment, as follows:

> *[22 year old female at Ritsumeikan]*
> My teacher says that we had better become regular employees first when we graduate from university. I agree that regular employment is more stable than irregular one.

> *[21 year old female at Seika]*
> *Would you feel anxious if you had to become an irregular employee?*
> Yes I would. When economical situation is unstable like now, irregular employees will be laid off first. Among the seniors around me, even excellent persons are unable to become regular employees and are at risk of becoming unemployed. When I think of such things I feel anxious.

> *[21 years old female at Seika]*
> My teacher said that thirty per cent of graduate students end up working as temporary staff […], but temporary workers tend to become unemployed now, so I strongly prefer to work as a permanent staff and be economically stable.

However, there were a few exceptions. The following interviewees (or their friends) did not feel worried about becoming irregular employees, even though they don't tend to become housewives/househusbands:

> *[20 years old male at Ritsumeikan]*
> Among my friends from junior high school and high school, there are many "freeters" (part-time workers). I'm in contact with a few of them. I don't ask them about their daily life, but they seem to be happy so far. I haven't heard them saying they were anxious about the future.

> *[21 year old female at Seika]*
> I think that we do not necessarily have to become permanent staff. If one wants to do something other than being employed, for example global travelling between stints of irregular work, one may well do that.

What is common about these exceptions is that the interviewees or their friends don't think that irregular employees tend to become, in the future, too poor to do what they want to do. Risk perception about irregular employment might depend on the ability to foresee the future economical situation of himself/herself. About this point, farther researches are needed.

4. Discussion: the bias for private over public management of 'new risks'

The above account has summarised changes in the landscape of social risks for young people in Japan. It has also provided a preliminary analysis of 38 interviews with university students in Kyoto regarding their risk perceptions and risk management strategies. The interviews revealed a broad range of risk perceptions but they also showed clear distinctions between the perceptions of males and females as well as between students at Ritsumeikan University and Kyoto Seika University. Most were similarly concerned about labour market volatility and the decrease in hiring at the time, but the former were markedly more confident about finding desired jobs and of their capacity to balance work and family duties. The Ritsumeikan students' main strategy for minimising risks was to apply for dozens or even hundreds of well-known companies in a variety of sectors. Students at the latter university, however, although certainly not completely *un*hopeful about their futures, were much less ambitious about their careers and less interested in working for large companies. Their strategies for managing insecurities were, furthermore, less clear, and they were more prone to staying close to their parental homes.

Broadly speaking, the desire of Ritsumeikan students to live according to established middle-class ideals – i.e. to seek jobs with big corporations and then form a family based on a clear separation of roles according to gender – was fairly strong, whereas Seika students demonstrated rather different values, including a lower emphasis on marriage in general. What was common, however, to students at both universities who *did* wish to marry was an apparent male-female mismatch in expectations regarding the balancing of work and family: the majority of females were keen – or at least strongly preferred – to keep working even if they formed a family and

had a child, but at the same time they were worried about finding supportive companies and ‘understanding’ partners. Those males who described clearly their family aspirations adhered to the male-breadwinner model in the sense that they hoped to ‘take care of their families’ by working hard at their jobs and by spending time with their children in the weekends.

A further important finding was the low awareness of – and rather dismissive attitudes towards – professional institutions that provide labour-related counselling and support. Moreover, none of the students we interviewed had ever heard of the youth employment and social support initiatives that are now springing up across Japan. Even though families and friends play an important role as providers of economic and mental support, this raises important questions about the ability of Japanese youth to draw on the full range of available measures to protect themselves amid changing labour markets (that exceedingly supply insecure jobs and require extremely long working hours of full-time workers).

It is unclear if this is viewed as a problem by Japanese policy-makers or not, but in light of the new landscape of social risks and the survey research presented here (although further investigations should be conducted on this topic), educating youth about existing support measures – whether at school, at workplaces, in the local community, through the internet, or at university – is something the government should consider. Even with such dissemination of knowledge, risks will continue to affect different layers of youth in different ways and they will still be perceived in context, but increasing knowledge is likely to enhance the capacity of various university (and other) students to draw on the range of support measures available in communities across Japan.

Currently a hot topic in Japan, *career education* presents one possible means for ‘arming’ youth with information and attitudes to support and protect themselves against old *and* new social risks in the Japanese labour markets. Still at an embryonic stage of development, what the potential political obstacles are to furnishing such kind of career education is of interest to the authors and something they will investigate in the future.

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