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# **The Habit of a Lifetime?**

## **Japanese and British University Students' Attitudes to Permanent Employment**

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# **The Habit of a Lifetime?**

## **Japanese and British University Students' Attitudes to Permanent Employment**

**By Peter Matanle**

### **Abstract**

This article presents analysis from a social constructionist perspective of data collected from British and Japanese university students on the desirability of lifetime employment at a single organisation. The article emphasises two related processes and in so doing helps to account for the diversity of employment structures both between and within the two countries as well as the persistence of lifetime employment in Japan. First, it shows that the two groups display some *similarities* in their attitudes but that their assumptions about employment practices in their countries may differ. These lead the two groups to develop the belief that they may be offered different outcomes and, thus, the students develop different conclusions as to the desirability of lifetime employment for themselves. Second, the research shows some *differences* in the students' approaches and these too lead them to reach different conclusions as to the desirability of lifelong employment. In addition, the research will highlight how, in both Britain and Japan, medical students' expectations are at times at odds with those of their colleagues in other subjects, and this may have important consequences for our understanding of how the respective employment systems are reproduced over time.

**Key words:** lifetime employment, permanent employment, attitudes, values, university students, social constructionism

### **Biographical Note**

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# **The Habit of a Lifetime?**

## **Japanese and British University Students' Attitudes to Permanent Employment**

### **Introduction**

Among the themes that have appeared from time to time in discussions on industrial organisation in Japan has been the suggestion that the system of lifetime<sup>i</sup> employment is changing such that in the future it would no longer resemble in its forms and functions the system which became entrenched in the post-war years. The reasons put forward for the system's reform and sometimes even its demise are various and may more or less be classified into two broad streams. The first views change being forced on the system from without, with globalisation being the major cause and differing degrees of socio-economic convergence the predicted result (see for example Clark 1979, Lincoln 1993, Lincoln and Nakata 1997, Nara 1997, and Rowley and Benson 2002). The second sees change as coming from within Japan as a consequence of Japan's endogenous socio-economic development (see for example, Ahmadjian and Robinson 2001, Berggren 1995, Cole 1971, Beck and Beck 1994, Benson 1998, Inoue 1997, Sato 2001, and Takahashi 1997) with a variety of cited causes and anticipated consequences. Before examining the literature more thoroughly in the next section, in this introduction I will first expand on the above and then present a summary of the issue that this article investigates.

Although convergence theorists have predicted many scenarios a large proportion of these studies posit that globalisation – meaning the increasing interconnectedness of socio-economic systems worldwide – coupled with the preponderance of power in the world economy being exerted by the American and, to a lesser extent, other western political economies, is causing socio-economic systems outside of what is often called the Anglo-American economy to converge in their forms and functions on this market oriented model. This theory is sometimes extended into the realm of attitudes and values where it is assumed, for example, that Japanese people are becoming increasingly exposed to external cultural influences and may thus be more susceptible to adopting ideas from elsewhere. In terms of the attitudes and values that underpin lifetime employment, therefore, this logic assumes that they too will come to be supplemented and perhaps even replaced by a market oriented approach whereby job tenure will decrease and individuals will wish to move from one employer to another in order to advance their careers.

Scholars approaching the problem from the perspective of Japan's industrial development use a different set of theories but may often reach similar conclusions. They suggest that long term social and psychological factors associated with Japan's socio-economic development create the conditions whereby developmentalist industrial structures will become obsolescent and will be transformed into a different set of institutional arrangements. In addition, these theories may also claim that as circumstances change, and Japanese society becomes characterised by material abundance rather than its scarcity, so Japanese people may be more willing to tolerate greater risk in their working and non-working lives and, consequently, will forego security and stability in favour of fulfilment and self-realisation. The resulting arrangements need not be a Japanese version of the Anglo-American market based socio-economic system but, since development might have certain path-dependent characteristics, the direction of change is, once again, likely to be towards this model.

In this article I wish to present research on the attitudes of two groups of university students, one British and one Japanese, to the problem of lifetime employment at a single organisation. In so doing I will show how some British and Japanese younger people are preparing to negotiate their paths through the structures and processes that they believe they will encounter in their adult working lives. Through presenting the results of this research I will first show that the two groups of students display some important *similarities* in their basic attitudes but that their assumptions about and expectations of employment practices in their respective countries may differ. These may lead the two groups of students to develop the belief that they may be offered different outcomes and, thus, the students sometimes come to different conclusions as to the desirability of lifetime employment for themselves. Second, I will show that the two groups of students also possess some crucial *differences* in their approaches and these may sometimes lead them to reach different conclusions as to the desirability of lifetime employment. Importantly, later in the research I will highlight how, in both Britain and Japan, medical students' assumptions about the structures of employment that await them are at times at odds with those of their colleagues in other subjects, and this may be important for our understanding of how the respective employment systems are reproduced.

As outlined, the issue of lifetime employment in the UK and Japan emphasises some important sociological problems. Among these I intend to focus my analysis and conclusions on the apparent sociological dualism of a market or organisational orientation which has occupied much of the literature on comparisons between British and Japanese employment practices since the early 1970s when Ronald Dore (1973) published his comparison of British and Japanese industrial organisation

and which has continued with, for example, the characterisation by Storey, Edwards and Sisson (1997) of British and Japanese career patterns as, respectively, multi- and single company 'career chimneys'. I will instead use the data presented herein to propose a theoretical explanation for the existence of differentiated employment systems between and within each country. This idea is loosely inspired by Katz and Darbishire's (2000) research that identifies a pattern of four basic types of employment system that have developed worldwide and which, more or less, exist in similar form in each of the seven countries (including the UK and Japan) included in their research.

The explanation, or theory, that I develop here also has its foundations within the social constructionist epistemological framework (Gergen 1999), which recognises that each person's actions should be understood as being both expressions of internal longings as well as interpretations of the circumstances he or she encounters on a day-to-day basis. In this way social constructionism allows us to understand how social structures and processes are understood by individuals in the contexts of their lives and how they are rooted in the needs, values, attitudes, and personalities and, consequently, the motivations and actions of individuals in their aggregate. Accordingly, rather than accounting for the above described dualism, this position allows for the existence of a range of multiple, layered, and nuanced understandings, behaviours, processes, and, thus, structures in society.

In particular, I will show how different types of students have already developed different sets of attitudes to the problem of lifetime employment that are based on their prior understandings of what they will encounter once they enter the labour force. Thus, we might therefore theorise that these prior expectations are both a reactive expression of individual students' interpretations of external structures as well as being a foundational causative factor in the development of the structures that the students themselves will occupy once they graduate and proceed with their careers and lives. It is through an analysis of developments from this perspective in sociological enquiry that I believe we may be able to account for the seemingly contradictory phenomena in Japan of both a diversification of employment practices and the apparently stubborn persistence of lifetime employment, against market based economic arguments in favour of its demise.

In the next section I will present a review of the principal literature on lifetime employment in Japan and, following on from that, in the succeeding section I will describe the study itself and its method. Then I will present and analyse the data gathered and in the final section I will discuss my conclusions.

## **Post-War Research on Lifetime Employment in Japan**

In reviewing approaches to lifetime employment it is worth remembering that it was the American industrial sociologist James Abegglen who was the first observer to bring it to the attention of scholars outside of Japan and the first to hint that it may eventually face the consequences of both exogenous and endogenous pressures to converge on the US model (Abegglen 1958). He described the 'critical difference' between Japanese and American industrial organisation as an implicit and non-contractual agreement between employer and employee to membership of the organisation for the whole working life of the employee. The basis of this arrangement was 'a system of shared obligation' that took 'the place of the economic basis of employment' (Abegglen 1958: 17). Emphasising the intensity of the organisational commitment, Abegglen described the agreement thus.

At whatever level of organization in the Japanese factory, the worker commits himself on entrance to the company for the remainder of his working career. The company will not discharge him even temporarily except in the most extreme circumstances. He will not quit the company for industrial employment elsewhere. He is a member of the company in a way resembling that in which persons are members of families, fraternal organizations, and other intimate and personal groups in the United States.

(Abegglen 1958: 11)

In the intervening years since then, Abegglen updated and expanded upon, but did not dramatically alter, his original thesis (Abegglen 1973 and Abegglen and Stalk 1985). In the 1970s, books by Robert E. Cole (1971) and Rodney Clark (1979) made their contributions to this genre.

Conversely, Ronald Dore (1973) posited that it was in part because of Japan's late development and steadily increasing influence over manufacturing industry worldwide that henceforth western firms would be attracted into adopting aspects of the Japanese firm's industrial organisation and, thus, converge towards Japan. In the 1980s Dore (1987) built on this thesis and felt able to identify the source of Japan's success. Borrowing from Harvey Liebenstein's term 'X-efficiency' (Liebenstein 1966, Quoted in Dore 1987: 17 and 184), Dore referred to the efficiencies of conscientiousness and togetherness that are developed over the long term in each company member and combine to form a feeling of company as community that western firms, notoriously riven by short-termism and class

and intra-firm industrial relations conflicts, were unable to emulate. Ezra Vogel wrote a variation on this thesis from a US perspective by publishing his wake-up call for American industry, *Japan as Number 1* (Vogel 1979). Reviewing the situation nearly thirty years later, however, both Gray (Gray 1998: 174) and Whitley (1999) remain skeptical that there has been any convergence in industrial organisation, and both predict differentiation as opposed to convergence. Even Dore (2000) now bemoans the baleful influence of the culture of marketisation and financialisation that Japanese MBA students learn in US business schools and bring back to Japan upon graduation, and concedes that Japanese capitalism may indeed be converging on the Anglo-American model.

Although the above authors place a great deal of importance on the social and cultural aspects of employment orientations in Japan and the USA and UK, and there are clearly a variety of opinions and conclusions as to the likelihood of a convergence between the two systems, the preponderant weight of analyses suggests that, as the forces of economic globalisation intensify and strengthen, and as Japan develops and rationalises its industry and economy still further, so the restraining influences of indigenous society and culture will wane and economic imperatives will come to prevail. Indeed, the back cover of the paperback edition of the most empirically detailed research on the Japanese system of labour and management to be produced in English in the 1990s asks in large type, and perhaps somewhat hopefully, ‘Is lifetime employment in Japan *finally* coming to an end?’<sup>iii</sup> (Sato and Sako (eds.) 1997). The implication behind these arguments is that the customary principle of lifetime employment has for some time been a functional constraint on economic dynamism which, when eventually forced to relax by the irresistible demands of globalisation and development, will give way to a market based system of labour relations and thereby release a higher level of growth (see for example Pilling 2005). Lincoln and Nakata’s (1997) work, for example, is another example of this approach because they suggest that the lifetime employment system’s ability to continue to maintain and reproduce itself is in part due to a deep cultural attachment to it among Japanese as a national institution. They go on to imply that any future relaxation of this emotional attachment might be a precondition for a relaxation of its institutional constraints and, thus, an economic rationalisation of the system. Lincoln and Nakata are supported by Ahmadjian and Robinson (2001) who argue that it has only been very recently that major corporations have felt any ‘safety in numbers’ and, therefore, only now have the cultural leeway to be able to ‘downsize’ their workforces. The authors make the important conceptual suggestion that both the cause and the effect of this ongoing process has been what they call the ‘deinstitutionalization of permanent employment’.



From the late 1980s there has also emerged a rich stream of literature that has emphasised the roles of attitudes and values in the formation of particular types of work consciousness. Many of these were based loosely around Maslovian-type theories of a hierarchy of needs (see Maslow 1987 [1954]) and suggested that, as Japanese society entered an era of material abundance, so attitudes to employment security would change and this would contribute to a weakening or even abandonment of lifetime employment by both employers and employees (see for example, Watanabe 1997). Thus, Ramzes (1990) suggested that the Japanese submerged self-identity was emerging under economic growth as a consumption oriented individual and this was causing a collapse in group loyalty and attachment to the corporation. The same year, in an article titled 'The End of Japanese Style Employment,' Whittaker (1990) argued that the lifetime employment system was under heavy social pressure to change as the effects of ageing, the achievement of affluence, internationalisation, the decline of manufacturing, technological advance, and the rising expectations of women took their toll. However, seven years later he and Oaklander (Oaklander and Whittaker 1997) concluded that, despite an unprecedentedly severe recession in the 1990s, there was little statistical evidence for a demise of lifetime employment and that Japan's 'employment society' had not crumbled. Nakatani (1998) adopted a similar perspective by speculating that Japanese society had turned away from the convoy system to one based on the principle of competition and that, consequently, young Japanese people were too impatient to persevere through the long years of the struggle for promotion in their companies. While Beck and Beck (1994), in their investigation of careers in the financial services and pharmaceutical industries, concluded that among managerial employees the system was more or less defunct and job-hopping similar to that practiced in Wall Street was becoming commonplace.

Adopting a legal perspective on the issue of values, Tabata (1995) speculated as to whether the Japanese employment system is moving in the direction of that of either the Anglo-American or Franco-German model. He argued that the Japanese legal system is abandoning the collectivist basis of labour law and instead adopting an individualist position, thereby fundamentally undermining the distinctiveness of the Japanese system. Moreover, Araki (2002: 23-28) argues that Japanese courts in the post-war period recognised in legal principle the custom of lifetime employment and the provision of a living wage that grew up in the immediate post-war years but goes on to state that, as a consequence of a much changed socio-economic situation in the 1990s, the courts are in the process of re-interpreting their foundational reasons for adhering to this approach and, thus, their support for the principle of lifetime employment.

Turning now to more recent empirical studies, Kato (2001) shows that, contrary to the predictions discussed above, there is little evidence of any widespread decline in job retention among male regular employees in large corporations and Matsuzuka (2002) found that from 1982 to 1997 job retention had, in the midst of the longest and most severe recession since the Second World War, even slightly increased among regular employees. However, and once again conceding arguments to market-based narratives, Kato adds that employment adjustment is being carried out on the margins of the system and to the detriment of employment security among younger people, female, and older male employees and Matsuzuka speculates that present developments in the culture of employment may presage more substantive changes to its structure.

More recently still, and in direct contradiction with Takahashi (1997) and Suehiro (2001), who conclude that lifetime employment no longer exists in any meaningful form, Baba (2004) argues that although seniority-based promotion has all but disappeared, lifetime employment has not. Going further, Inagami (2004), in a presentation of long-run trends in employment across the whole socio-economy, argues that any major expansion in the Japanese firm's numerical flexibility through employment diversification and other measures must be considered alongside the long-term shift away from manufacturing towards the demands of service related employment as well as the huge long-term expansion of employment generally and an expansion in the numbers of female and elderly workers in particular<sup>iii</sup>. He shows that while the labour force itself expanded by 27.1 per cent between 1975 and 2000, the number of employees (as opposed to self-employed and family workers) increased by 46.9 per cent and now makes up more than 84 per cent of the Japanese workforce. Among employees, while non-regular employees have increased to their highest post-war proportion of 27.2 per cent, regular workers remain by far the largest proportion at 72.8 per cent. Inagami states that the larger proportion of contingent workers is not simply a result of the increasingly varied and stringent demands made by employers but is also commensurate with changing individual lifestyles and needs and is 'not incompatible with lifetime employment' (Inagami 2004: 43). In the light of the evidence that he presents it is difficult not to agree with Inagami (2004: 44) when he states that 'long term employment in itself will not cease to exist'.

## **Research Method**

This study arose out of the following research question. If for the last 30 years or so the lifetime employment system, against rational economic and market-based arguments for its abandonment, has remained largely intact in large corporations and public bodies, what is keeping it in place? Since undergraduate students at Japan's national universities are among the prime candidates for entry into large and prestigious organisations, I wanted to find out what their attitudes are to spending the whole of their working lives at a single organisation. For, it seemed to me that one of the keys to the survival of the system would, *ipso facto*, lie in the attitudes of those who are to work within it and who would be responsible for its inter-generational reproduction.

The first stage of this research was performed at Niigata University in Japan in 2001 and the University of Sheffield in the UK in 2002. Both of these universities are large public institutions teaching a broad range of subjects at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Both universities are also located in large provincial cities away from the metropolitan core and both universities have a good reputation for research and teaching that reaches beyond their local region. I asked undergraduate students at both universities the following question: 'After you graduate, do you want to work in the same organisation until you retire?' Students had the option of 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know' for their response and were then given a space to write their reasons for this choice. They were then asked to give details of their gender, year of study and subject of study. I distributed the questionnaire to students at various locations on the main campus of each university and was able to gather exactly 640 completed questionnaires in Japan and 460 responses in Britain. For both sets of students, the questionnaire requested that only those holding respectively Japanese or British nationality should respond. In addition, since distributing the questionnaire I have been able to have follow-up interviews with a small number of students at each university, in 2003 in the UK and 2004 in Japan, in order to clarify some of the qualitative understandings contained in the questionnaire.

### **Respondent Profiles**

The following table gives percentages of student respondents by gender, year group and subject of study. As can be seen from the table, representation is roughly equal according to gender and all major undergraduate subject and year groups are represented. The only anomaly that might be seen is the weighting among the Japanese respondents towards the lower years. In all probability this reflects Japanese undergraduates' current tendency for working part-time for long hours and, from the third year onwards, spending increasingly large amounts of time off campus in job search

activities. The British sample shows greater balance in this respect but is still biased towards earlier years. Nevertheless, it can be seen that a broad balance of students from both universities has been achieved

Table 1: Respondent Profiles (all figures in percent)

About here

### **Quantitative Response Data**

Figure 1: Student Responses by Nationality

About here

From figure 1 above it can be seen that just under twice the proportion of Japanese (21.9%) than British (11.2%) respondents wished to work at the same organisation till their retirement. A little under half of the proportion of Japanese (29.2%) than British (66.3%) responded that they did not want lifetime employment and, interestingly, a much higher proportion of British students expressed certainty about their preferred future, with only 20.3 per cent replying 'don't know' as opposed to 48.9 per cent for the Japanese group. However, we must remain cautious here, since part of this apparent disparity can be attributed to the higher percentage of Japanese students in the early years of student life responding and many of these younger students may not yet have thought as deeply as their elders about their future career direction and preferences. As figure 2 shows below, when looking at responses by year group, for both sets of students the closer an individual gets to graduation the more certain he or she is likely to be regarding the career pattern he or she wishes to lead. Nevertheless, this is by no means the only explanation for such a difference because, as figure 2 also shows, even the youngest cohort of British students shows both a greater certainty about future career paths and a greater propensity not to opt for lifetime employment than the oldest cohort of Japanese students. Indeed, what is noticeable about figure 2 is the almost straight line graph that can be drawn among 'no' respondents from the first year through to the fourth year Japanese and on into the first year to the fourth year British students; this representing a clear quantitative and qualitative difference in career aspirations between the two groups.

Figure 2: Student Responses by Year Group.

About here

With regard to student responses according to their gender, there are two things that become apparent. First is the strong similarity shown between males and females by nationality between the two groups and, second, a slight reversal in tendency between the two national groups. In the British group more females (12.4%) than males (9.6%) wish to take up the opportunity of lifetime employment, while in the Japanese sample more males (23.8%) than females (20.1%) wish to take advantage of it. Moreover, among the Japanese group a somewhat higher percentage of females (52.7%) than males (44.7%) expressed that they didn't know if they wanted to work at the same organisation till retirement, while there was an insignificant difference between males and females in this regard among the British students. Taking the written comments into account, these disparities can be partly attributed to a higher tendency among Japanese females either to wish to take time out of employment for child rearing or to question the likelihood of being able to remain employed through marriage, childbirth and child rearing.

Figure 3: Student Responses by Gender.

About here

Figure 4 below shows the student responses by nationality and subject of study. For the three subject areas of Science and Engineering, Social Sciences, and Arts and Humanities, the responses roughly parallel those of the national groups as a whole where, as described above, the Japanese students showed a tendency towards not knowing and the British students being more certain of their desire not to take advantage of lifetime employment.

What is interesting about the graph is that, among medical students, the groups show responses that are significantly different from their peers in other subjects. That is to say, a larger proportion of Japanese medical students do not wish to be employed in the same organisation till retirement than other Japanese students of other subjects and, more significantly still, in a reversal of the general tendency for British students to reject lifetime employment in greater proportion than their Japanese counterparts, more than double the proportion of British medical students than Japanese medical

students do want to take advantage of lifetime employment. Indeed, among the British students, the proportion of medical students wishing to take advantage of lifetime employment is more than three times the proportion for all the other subject groupings. A possible answer to the question of why this may be so will be discussed later in this article and is, I believe, a very important clue as to the reasons why lifetime employment shows such a high degree of persistence in Japan and a lack thereof in Britain. In the next section I will provide further information as to possible answers for these questions by presenting the qualitative evidence gathered from students at the two universities.

Figure 4: Student Responses by Subject of Study.

About here.

### **Qualitative Response Data**

So far we have looked only at the numerical data gathered with regard to the main question of whether students, after graduation, wished to work at the same organisation until their retirement and we have seen these data according to the students' nationalities, their gender and year group, and their subject of study. In this section I hope to probe deeper into the problem by presenting qualitative data based on the written comments on the questionnaire and subsequent interviews with students at the two universities. I will do this by first presenting comments by the British students and then by complementing and contrasting these with the comments by the Japanese students. In so doing I hope to be able to build a more complex and nuanced interpretation of the dichotomised British market and Japanese organisation orientations that are often presented in the academic literature. This picture will be based upon what I would like to call a series of differentiated employment cultures that exist alongside each other within each country. These different employment cultures may contrast as much within each society as they do between the societies of the UK and Japan. As such, therefore, what we may wish to consider is that we are in a period worldwide where it is becoming less valuable to talk about national institutional cultures and more so to talk about differentiated sub-cultures that exist globally across national borders<sup>iv</sup>. This indeed may be interpreted by some as a form of convergence (Katz and Darbishire 2000) but it is also very different from understanding convergence in terms of systems and cultures moving away from a specific national orientation and towards an Anglo-American market-based orientation. Moreover, and as we will see in the following section, I also wish to caution against the temptation to view this

research as support for the globalisation as homogenisation thesis that seeks to deny both the role of national institutional cultures and the existence of variability within those cultures.

### ***British Respondents***

Coding responses to the questionnaire and dividing them according to their answer to the first question we begin to arrive at a more nuanced appreciation of how British university students may understand their careers and the requirement to negotiate their own paths through the twin pillars of their hopes for themselves and the structures and processes that they expect to encounter in their working lives.

By far the majority of the British student respondents reject lifetime employment as an attractive career pattern for themselves. Of the 310 British students who expressed that they did not want lifetime employment, 92 percent of these, or 62 per cent of the entire sample, said that they thought that lifetime employment would either be boring and/or that they would prefer a career with a greater degree of variety. Following are a selection of the written responses from this group.

Would get boring. Want to experience different things.

Be boring and don't expect to live in same place until I'm 65. Probably have kids so lifestyle may not suit same job for that length of time.

The working life is becoming longer so its unlikely that one organisation could remain interesting for that length of time.

I value change in a career a lot. I get very bored with the same thing day after day. Different organisations equal different experiences and knowledge to be gained.

I would like varied experience and would move according to promotion prospects.

'Variety is the spice of life'.

Change is a good thing! - New challenges and benefits.

It is clear from such responses that a significant proportion of the British students regard the prospect of lifetime employment as potentially boring, unfulfilling, and restrictive to personal development. Indeed, it also becomes apparent that many students have a positive understanding of the roles of change, variety, and challenge in their lives. Nevertheless, from these comments it remained unclear as to how the students may have arrived at such conclusions. Thus, in oral interviews I asked some students the question, 'What is it about lifetime employment at the same organisation that you think might be boring?' In the main, responses to this question followed a similar logic to the following two respondents' comments.

I would hate to have to work for the same company for such a long time. One reason I came to university was not to have to do that. I don't want to say that those jobs are not worth having or anything ... its just that I want something different from that ... more of a challenge than that. I want to experience different workplaces and different jobs ... maybe go abroad for a few years and so on. I like change in my life.

I know I probably won't have anything like the job security they had in the past ... but ... I don't know if I really want it either. It must've been like ... pretty dull doing the same thing day in day out. Compared to that I think our generation is really lucky ... like to have the chance to do so many things and have so many experiences ... to travel too.

The British students' responses reveal an attitude to lifetime employment that may in part be a legacy of their understanding of the peculiarities of Britain's post-war organisational structures, practices and industrial relations. Throughout most of this period, especially in the nationalized heavy and manufacturing industries, in a not too dissimilar fashion to lifetime employment in Japan, there was a high degree of employment security provided to nearly all employees. However, and in contrast to the Japanese system, this was balanced by high levels of job demarcation, low levels of job rotation and almost no opportunity for union members to advance into managerial grades. Again, in the civil service, local government offices, the high street banks, the retail industry, and other white-collar occupations too, there were high levels of employment security but low levels of employment mobility, both geographically and organisationally, except for the small number recruited directly into elite managerial track positions.



Thus, the British students appear to be motivated by the opportunity to experience challenge, variety, adventure, and change for the psychological benefits that these employment attributes might confer and are consciously rejecting an employment model that they perceive to be stifling, underwhelming, and rooted in Britain's rather unattractive post-war employment patterns. Moreover, many students do not appear to be very motivated by the opportunity to develop deep and long lasting relations of trust and friendship with work colleagues or the opportunity to take advantage of the stability and security that lifetime employment might offer, instead preferring the opportunity regularly to meet different types of new people and experience the feeling of a fresh challenge that changing employer might confer. In fact, there were almost no students among the 460 surveyed and those that were subsequently interviewed who claimed to have security and stability high on their list of work priorities. The following student comment is representative of such an approach.

I like to change my environment and circumstances every few years, and get new experiences whenever possible. This outweighs any benefits like pension and promotion etc of working at the same organisation for years.

Those British students who were ambivalent about lifetime employment were the second largest of the three groups and they expressed a greater variety of employment orientations than the 'no' group described above. A quarter of these students responded that they might wish to take advantage of lifetime employment so long as it did not involve a boring job and/or it involved a variety of experiences, tasks, locations, and opportunities. Another quarter of the students said that it depended on the type of organisation and the opportunities for challenge, promotion and/or financial reward that it offered. Around 40 percent of students either left the section blank or said that they had not really thought about the issue properly, with many of these being in the early years of their university careers. Only three students responded that they might prefer lifetime employment because of the security that it offered, but all of these cautioned that they might feel bored by it.

What is revealing about this set of students is that, unlike the previous group, they show a degree of openness to the possibility that lifetime employment might offer them the opportunities for variety, challenge, and adventure that they are looking for. Following are some comments from the students in this group.

Yes, if I enjoyed working there but I am interested in doing many different things so probably wouldn't stay in the same place.

Depends on the organisation. Would stay if varied positions.

Depends whether the job is challenging and pays well.

May be boring staying in same company but would be nice to have job security if there is variety and challenge too.

I still don't know what I want to do! If I enjoy it, I would want to stay in the same job. But it depends on future prospects - promotion, abroad. If I can get these in the same organisation then why not!

Finally, and in my opinion the most interesting group among all the students surveyed, are the British students that said that they would like to take advantage of lifetime employment. Fully 54 percent of students in this group were students of medical sciences. Overwhelmingly these students mentioned their desire to work within the National Health Service (NHS) and some of these students even showed a moral commitment to supporting the organisation through their work. Others expressed the understanding that the NHS offers employees a variety of opportunities for career development and personal growth. While some expressed a rejection of the private sector and/or private medicine, still others wished to show loyalty to the organisation because of its provision of an advanced education and satisfying and fulfilling employment opportunities. Importantly, and in contrast to the somewhat imprecise responses of students from other subjects, these respondents appeared to possess a greater degree of detailed knowledge of the type of career patterns that are possible within the particular structures of the NHS. In this sense they believe that it is possible in this organisation to have a career characterized by variety, challenge, material and psychological rewards, upward and geographical mobility, and a commitment to ethical values. Following are a selection of these responses.

Because the NHS are paying for my education so I should be loyal and I think working for the NHS would be more interesting and challenging than a private company.

NHS. Therefore I want to work with my field until I retire (medicine). Without 'selling out' and going private.

What I have always wanted to do, and there are so many opportunities to choose from.

In oral interview the following student expressed the opinion of these medical students quite clearly.

I feel that the job I intend to do ... medicine ... will fit the idea I have of a fulfilling career. Although the NHS does have its problems I think that this is the area where I can be of most use ... I don't want to consider private medicine as I have a strong sense of commitment to this type of future. In the NHS I can really devote myself to something valuable ... to developing myself at the same time ... and wherever I go or whatever I do it will be an interesting experience ... and I'll get to meet so many interesting people.

In summary, what the medical students' responses show is that many of the British 'no' and 'don't know' students may not have been rejecting lifetime employment at a single organisation per se. Instead, what they seem to be rejecting is a particular form of lifetime employment; one that is narrowly focused on a small range of job tasks, has little in the way of geographical or occupational mobility and variety, and provides little in the way of opportunities for progressively upward movements in terms of challenge, status, and pay. Some of the non-medical students hinted at this conclusion, instead saying that they would be willing to give it a try if it provided them with the rewards that they craved. The medical students, however, appear to be key to this research because of the prior knowledge that they have been able to accumulate about their chosen occupation and organisation, unlike the other students who, for the most part, may not know where they will end up. The comments and interviews by the medical students show that where a positive paradigm for lifetime employment is available, in the form of the NHS, and accurate and detailed prior knowledge of that paradigm is accessible, many British younger people are very willing to join such an organisation. Furthermore, in such circumstances they may then go on voluntarily to restricting their own inter-organisational job changing activity, as well as positively embracing the core values that such an organisation espouses and participate in activities that protect the organisation from external pressure for change. In this way, we might be able to imagine the effects of values, attitudes, and knowledge in the construction and reproduction of socio-economic processes and structures.

### *Japanese Respondents*

As with the British student respondents, this section will begin with the Japanese students who responded that they did not want to take advantage of lifetime employment. Although 54 per cent of these 'no' respondents said that they viewed lifetime employment as potentially boring or they might forego the opportunity for greater variety in their careers, this is a considerably smaller proportion of the 'no' group than the 92 percent recorded for the British above. Moreover, when we consider the proportion of these respondents among the whole sample, while 62 percent of the entire British sample rejected lifetime employment for reasons of boredom or wanting more variety, this is matched by only 15 percent of the Japanese sample. The following are a selection of comments from this 15 percent of respondents<sup>v</sup>.

Because there is a possibility to become stuck in the company's way of doing things I want to be a worker with many and diverse talents.

I will develop myself in various situations and relationships.

I may be bored. I want to be stimulated in my work.

I want to have various experiences in various places in order to broaden my outlook. It doesn't need to be one place to realise that.

In interview, moreover, the following two students, while expressing a desire to change employer in order to gain a variety of experiences, also qualified this with an ambivalent acceptance that lifetime employment also has the potential to deliver variety.

It depends on the organisation. Basically I want to have a look at various occupations because I feel that involvement with society is important for me. There is a possibility after retirement to think that continuing for 50 years or so in the same job was interesting I think ...

My ideal is to find work that I like and to stay there. But I think I can't work in the same organisation because I may come to change my objectives and human relations. However,

working in the same organisation might also be a great adventure as I might get to do various jobs and work in various places.

Interestingly, and in contrast with the British medical sciences respondents, very slightly less than double the number of Japanese medical students expressed a desire not to take advantage of lifetime employment than those who wanted to. Noticeable again when considered alongside the British sample, not a single medical student expressed a commitment to any specific organisations or principles other than those associated with personal concerns for advancement, variety, stability, and interest in the content of the work. In this sense, the Japanese students' responses are, like their British counterparts, heavily informed by their understanding of the structure of employing institutions that they believe they will encounter upon graduation. In Japan a national equivalent of the NHS in the UK does not exist, and the majority of medical institutions are small private hospitals and specialised clinics that are dotted about the urban and rural landscape. Thus, unlike the British students, Japanese medical students are unlikely to enter a huge NHS-sized organisation that will provide them with an upward sloping career trajectory composed of a variety of challenging and interesting opportunities. Rather, they are more likely to work long term either in a single large urban hospital or work in and manage a smaller private clinic. The following are a selection of comments by the Japanese medical students who do not want lifetime employment for themselves.

I don't know how far I can get if it is the same organisation.

I have the feeling that I want to go to various places.

If the organisation is good I want to stay and if it is bad I'd like to quit.

Significantly, among the students who responded 'yes' to lifetime employment, rather than showing a positive attachment to lifetime employment itself, 39 percent instead expressed their perspective by citing negative feelings towards changing their employment. Many of these students expressed an expectation of the difficulty of changing jobs in Japan either because of currently tight employment conditions or normative understandings of employers not wishing to hire mid-career. Others cited the problems of having to develop a new set of human relations with colleagues, having to unlearn old and learn new sets of organisation specific knowledge, and expressing a desire to commit to one

career and to follow it through to its conclusion. The following statements are indicative of some of these feelings.

It's not really a good thing constantly to be changing your job. Many companies do not like people who are always changing.

It would be scary to lose one's job once one has got it. The employment situation is very difficult at the moment. It is hard to find a job again in Japan.

Though most students, while sometimes expressing negative feelings towards the possible disadvantages of changing job also saw advantages in staying with the same employer, as the following statements show.

Once you get used to the work it becomes easier to do and human relations become better.

Once I remember how to do my job that's it. I can feel secure if I don't change my job.

It is interesting to note that, as with the British medical students, Japanese students of all disciplines showed a reasonably good knowledge of what lifetime employment might entail for them in both the private and public sectors, even if their knowledge is often not as organisation specific as the British students with regard to the NHS, and this knowledge often provided them with the confidence to wish take advantage of lifetime employment. For example, in common with students at many provincial public universities, some respondents expressed a desire to work in their prefectural or local government organisations and appeared to be well acquainted with the prevalence of lifetime employment there and the types of career patterns available. In addition, and in reference to the private sector, even though the following student has never experienced lifetime employment himself, he shows a good understanding of the organisational characteristics of large companies through acquiring it from his father. He also describes the significance to him of developing good human relations, relative to some of the tasks required of company employees.

My father works for a big company. He told me every large company in Japan has a personnel management division, a sales division, a general affairs division and so on. It doesn't really matter which company one joins, they are all the same in that sense. So, the

most important thing is if one likes the atmosphere in the place and whether one can get on with the people. If that happens then I would like to stay. If not I will try to move early on and find somewhere else that I like and then stay there till retirement.

The following interview response combines the issues of gaining experience, establishing relations of trust and the problem of unlearning and learning specific types of knowledge. As such he demonstrates that questions of employment rarely resolve themselves over a single issue but incorporate a balance of sometimes competing and at other times reinforcing objectives. Moreover, he shows a maturity of thinking about working long term in a single organisation that, often, the British students seemed to lack. He appreciates that sometimes it may not be what he would like but that he should 'persevere' (*gaman*) with these unattractive aspects in order to achieve his objectives.

If I stay at the same organisation for a long time I may progress and build up my experience and gain the trust of others. So it will be stable. It would be hard to change mid-way and learn everything from the beginning again. I am young so I don't know what will happen in the future but I want to have a happy and successful life, but that does not mean that I have to always be interested in everything I do. Sometimes I will be bored, but that is to be expected and I have to persevere if I want to achieve lots of things in my life.

In the light of the above response, it is important to note here that perseverance is a valued personal attribute in Japanese culture which rarely has its equivalent in the UK. Thus, to 'give up' one's job without having tried hard to make it work is often understood to signal a lack of resolve. In this respect, one significant group among the Japanese 'yes' respondents was those that expressed seeing through long-term commitments either to themselves or to others.

If the first job I find is one that I want to do then I will do it for the rest of my life.

I want to complete one thing to the very end.

I want to be a professional. I will persevere with that till the end.

Finally in this section, nearly 60 percent of the 'don't know' group expressed, in one way or another, that if the job or the organisation suited them then they would probably want to stay until retirement.

The split was approximately one third of students who were motivated by interest in their work and two thirds by the organisation itself. This also points up an interesting aspect of long term employment in Japan because it is expected by many people that, while they may work for a very long time in a single organisation, their actual job tasks, the complexity of their work, and their levels of responsibility will vary and most probably progressively increase in complexity and challenge over time. Thus, since these aspects will change so much over the course of an employee's career and the type of organisation, and the people within it will not, so the latter may take on a greater deal of importance for the individual when he or she is faced with the task of applying for and staying in a job. The following are a selection of written responses from this group.

If that work really suits me then I would like to but if not I may change.

If I feel comfortable with the organisation and my colleagues then I would like to stay there.  
If not then I don't want to.

I don't know if I will work at the same company forever because I may not be satisfied by the company.

Noticeably, many Japanese students expressed their reasons as to whether the job content or the organisation suited their personalities or attributes rather than, and in contrast to the British group, whether they were interested in or liked the actual content of their work. In interview I probed this issue more deeply and the following statements revealed more about how some Japanese students understood the demands of long term employment in a single organisation.

I don't think my personality or my talents will change so much after I graduate and so, if a place suits me in that way then I think I should make an effort to stay there ... I think this approach will help me to achieve a more satisfying life than simply following my interests, which may change a lot as I encounter new experiences.

If I follow my interests rather than my personality then I will be led to change my job a lot and that will cause me a lot of trouble in settling in to new places and establishing new relationships with my colleagues.



## **Conclusion**

What emerges from this research and its preceding discussions is, I hope, an opportunity for us to refine our understanding of the employment landscape in both Japan and Britain and, as a result, to develop some theoretical explanations. If we take a social constructionist perspective we can begin to show how, through gathering this type of data and examining its meanings in a qualitative sense, multiple and layered understandings and expectations of employment structures may develop. Accordingly this, coupled with a great deal of variety in terms of individual preferences, and in conjunction with a continuing diversification of employment styles being favoured by management, may lead to both a reduction in the size and scope of lifetime employment in Japan but, curiously, a shoring up of its foundations where it continues to exist.

The student responses above support the contention that many university graduates in the UK and Japan indeed do not value income stability and employment security in the way that these attributes were perhaps valued by previous generations. For example, Stoetzel (1955), in his research on younger people's attitudes in Japan in the 1950s shows that security and standard of living were considered by youth to be the most important conditions for happiness by those who thought that health alone was not enough. Nevertheless, if we probe more deeply into the responses of the two groups above we come to a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of current students' career development approaches and behaviours. The example of the British medical sciences students is very instructive in this regard. These students believe that the NHS provides them with enough breadth to achieve their career preferences and, accordingly, they were positive about the prospect of lifetime employment within the context of that specific organisation. By contrast, many other British students appear to expect that lifetime employment will entail precisely those things that are least attractive to them. This expectation seems to have been strongly coloured by acquired understandings of lifetime employment in the post-war nationalised heavy and manufacturing industries and white collar service occupations, rather than from a detailed appreciation of what contemporary British organisations currently may be providing for their employees.

When we compare the British students' responses and comments with those from the Japanese group we find that many Japanese students supported lifetime employment in a similar manner to the British medical students. Many perceive lifetime employment as offering them opportunities for personal challenge, development and growth as well as the opportunity for upward and geographical

mobility. These students believe that lifetime employment offers variety in addition to the opportunity to develop deep human relations and to take advantage of the stability and security that come with them. However, many showed a degree of caution with initially taking up the opportunity, instead expressing a desire to get to know the organisation, their colleagues, and the job first before making a firm long-term commitment. Hence the high proportion of this type of 'don't knows' in the Japanese sample.

Thus, for many Japanese students, lifetime employment is desirable for precisely the same reasons as both the British medical students wished to take advantage of it and the British non-medical sciences students rejected it. In other words, the British and Japanese students, at one level, have very similar attitudes and values regarding their future careers but, because of their differential understandings of what lifetime employment actually entails, they reached different conclusions as to its desirability. In addition, the two groups of students did show differences in their attitudes, for example in the higher rate of Japanese students valuing deep human relations, stability and security, and the normative requirement to persevere before giving up, and this too led the two groups to develop a difference in their attitudes to the desirability of lifetime employment.

There is a great deal of evidence available to show how lifetime employment occupies a smaller proportion of the Japanese labour force than hitherto and this steady drop has for the most part been in the direction of increasing the proportion of part-time, temporary and dispatch workers. Nevertheless, to reiterate Inagami's (2004) rejoinder, this development is in no small part a consequence of a diversification of lifestyle choices made by an increasingly diverse range of people within the labour force. Inagami's research demonstrates that the diversification of employment styles itself is thus not simply driven by the externally governed demands of economically motivated managers in an age of globalisation, but depends also on the needs, desires, attitudes, and values of the men and women that compose the labour force. By the same token, it is also undeniable that job tenures and employment retention among regular workers remain remarkably high in Japan by the standards of other developed countries (Kato 2001, Matsuzuka 2002 and Matanle 2003: 77), that this is especially the case among managerial grades of employees (JIL 1998), and that this too is due to no small degree on the willingness of individual men and women to take advantage of the opportunity to work under such conditions.

If attitudes and values are the well-springs of motivation, which itself is the well-spring of social action (Giddens 1990) then, according to the attitudes and values expressed in this research, most British students would probably wish to adopt a multi-organisation approach to their career development and, if not a majority then at least a large minority of, Japanese students would wish to opt for a single-organisation career development approach in their actual lives. Indeed, as Storey, Edwards and Sisson (1994) show, in both countries some of the structures and institutions of employment already favour these two approaches. According to their research, in each case the employee moves from one position to another in search of career growth and greater responsibilities and rewards, except that the Japanese manager does so within the context of a managed career development plan within a single organisation, or single-company 'career chimney', and the British manager does so in a more self-directed and haphazard manner involving a number of different organisations, or multi-company 'career chimney'.

In summary, the survival of lifetime employment in Japan appears to depend on two inter-related and inter-dependent motivations, with those being the preparedness of employers to offer it and the willingness of employees to take advantage of it (Sako 1997). Much commentary about the system has predicted that both of these two motivations are in the process of weakening such that the practice itself is either under threat or about to disappear. This article focuses itself on the latter issue; that of the willingness of a group of Japanese university students to take up lifetime employment after graduation. In addition it uses a comparison with an equivalent group of British people as a method of delving deeper into the nature of their motivations. Furthermore, this research is derived from a social constructionist position which assumes that individuals will develop understandings of their world through their experiences, their learning, and contact with others, and that the quality of this knowledge, or inner world, is necessarily highly subjective. It assumes that individuals will, where possible, attempt to call their inner worlds into being through their choices and behaviours, and thus realise a process, in aggregate, of social construction. Moreover, according to this line of reasoning, social practices may have a tendency to become ritualised, or habitual, and possess meaning beyond instrumental motivations. Thus, despite formal economic arguments for the disbanding of lifetime employment, if some Japanese young people still wish to enter into lifetime employment then that in itself may be a powerful factor in favour of system maintenance, even if this is confined to a smaller proportion of the labour force than previously. In addition, despite many large British employers offering a great deal in terms of long-term career development within the

organisation, many British young people appear to be wedded to somewhat outdated notions of what lifetime employment entails and prefer to adopt the multi-company career type.

Although it is undoubtedly the case that in Japan lifetime employment is increasingly being supplemented by other forms of employment, it is also the case that employers continue to offer permanent regular employment to a significant proportion of workers in both the public and private sectors. This research shows that Japanese young people have a good knowledge of what they want to achieve and of what kind of life may await them and many of these, for a variety of reasons, wish to take up the opportunity of lifetime employment if the conditions are right for them. Thus, under these circumstances, it seems clear that lifetime employment will continue to exist in Japan for some time to come.

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## Tables and Figures

Table 1: Respondent Profiles (all figures in percent)

Note:

Sex	Male	Female	No Response		
Japanese	48.7	51.3	0.1		
British	43	56.5	0.4		
Year Group	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup> or Higher	
Japanese	78	11.3	8	2.7	
British	29.7	36.4	27.6	6.8	
Subject of Study	Science and Engineering	Medical Sciences	Social Sciences	Arts and Humanities	Other/No Response
Japanese	19.5	8.3	51.6	20	0.6
British	11.1	17.8	40.2	28	2.9

Figures rounded to the nearest 0.1 percent.

Figure 1: Student Responses by Nationality

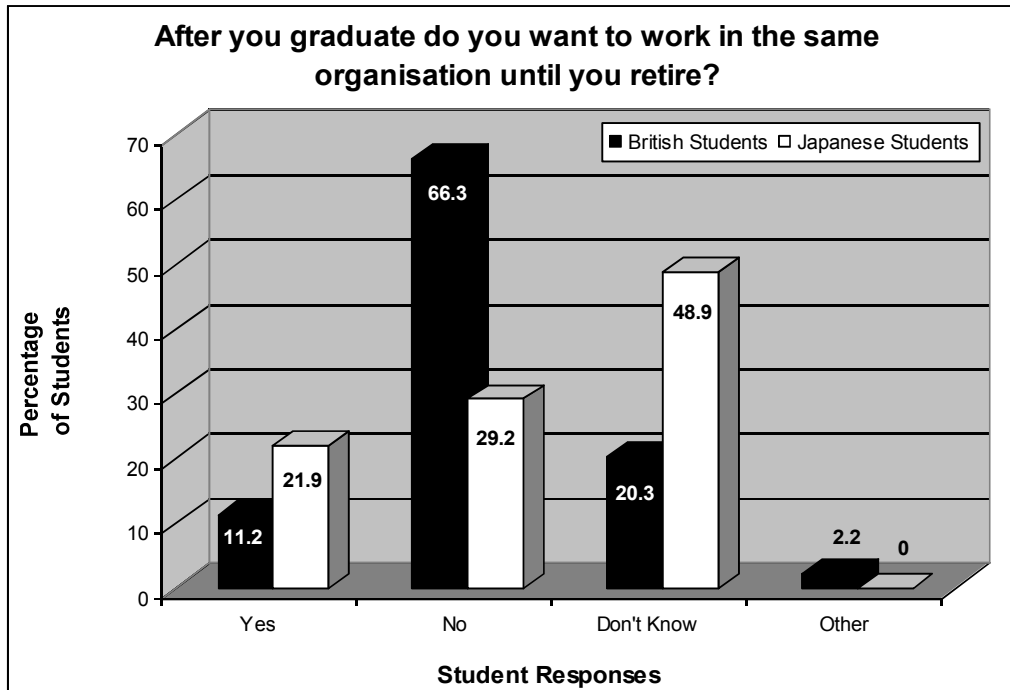


Figure 2: Student Responses by Year Group.

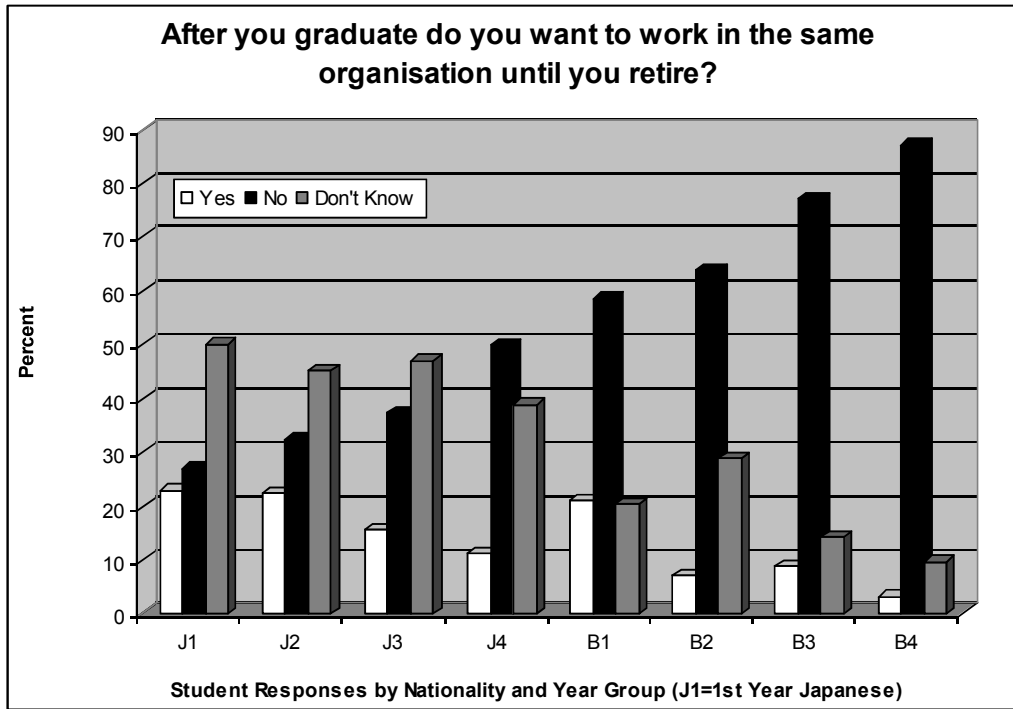


Figure 3: Student Responses by Gender.

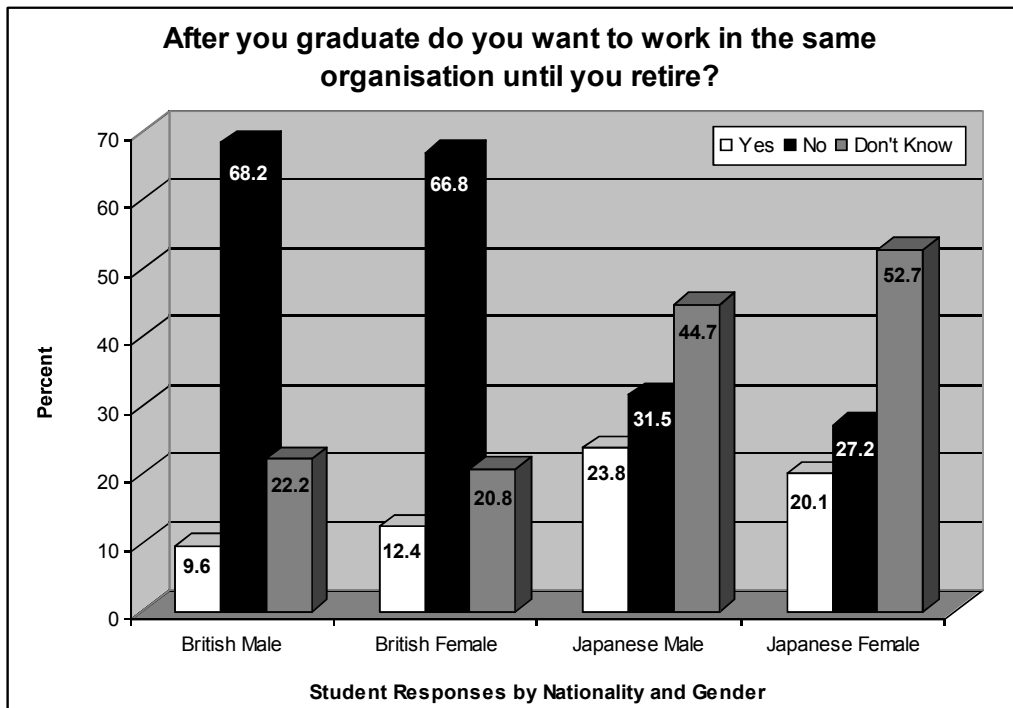
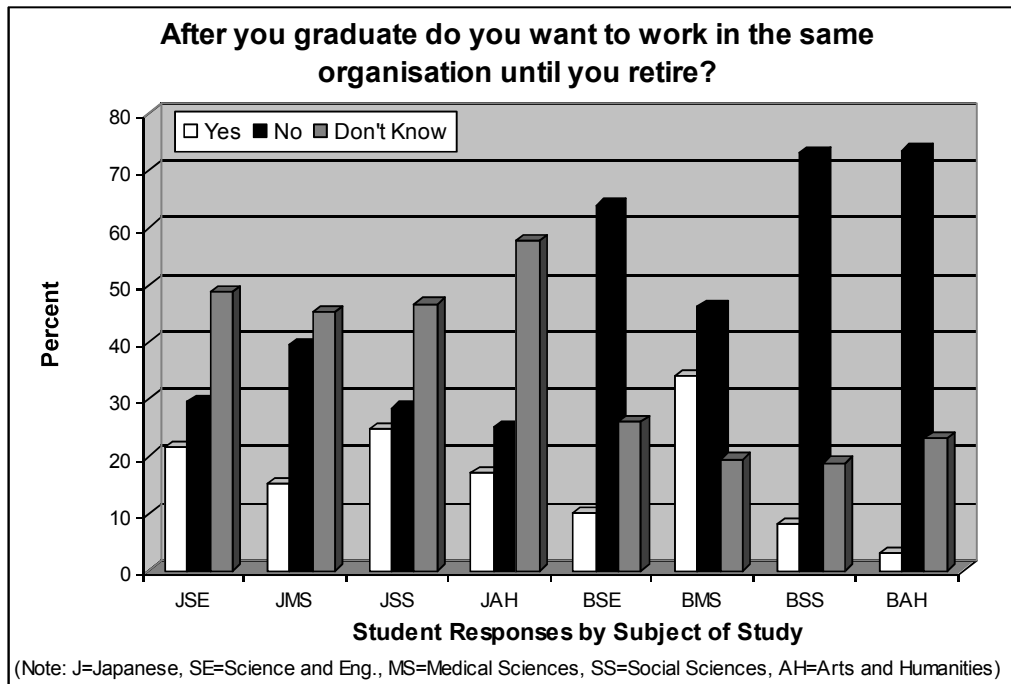


Figure 4: Student Responses by Subject of Study.



<sup>i</sup> Lifetime employment is but one among many terms of reference that describe the custom of recruitment at or near graduation from school or university and employment in the same organisation, or at least remaining within its care, until the customary retirement age. Other terms that have been used are: permanent employment, lifelong employment, long-term stable employment, and in Japanese *shūshin koyō* - 終身雇用, *chōki koyō* - 長期雇用, or, *chōki antei koyō* - 長期安定雇用.

<sup>ii</sup> My italics.

<sup>iii</sup> See also Sato 2001.

<sup>iv</sup> See Katz and Darbishire (2000) for a more detailed exposition of this argument.

<sup>v</sup> All Japanese responses were either written or spoken in Japanese and subsequently translated into English.