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The Entrepreneur of the Self: Understanding Neoliberalism-as-Enterprise in Japan's Top Global University Project

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Abstract

Relying on Foucault's entrepreneurial Selfhood, this study intends to uncover lived accounts of neoliberal subjectivity arising from Japanese education reform. Indeed, given its intention to engender 'internationalized' human capital, the Top Global University Project (TGUP) presents one such market-oriented endeavor. Japan's pivot toward neoliberal marketization has been subjected to fierce scholarly critique; however, despite these efforts, empirical phenomenological accounts of entrepreneurial Selfhood locally present a notable gap that this project, in part, seeks to address. Drawing on interpretive phenomenological analysis, I hope to understand how the inculcation of specific neoliberal values, soft skills, and capitals (self-reliance, individuality, discipline, foreign language proficiency, cosmopolitanism, etc.) connect personhood and citizenship locally, specifically for nine learners ($f=6, m=3$) at a TGUP institution. Initial findings indicate that, in a nested terrain of shadow education, New Public Management, and hyper-competitive credentialism, graduation from brand-name colleges represents the final step for 'responsible' graduates to emerge as globally-orientated human capital. To achieve this journey, participants reported instances of entrepreneurial Selfhood from as young as elementary school, where the orthodox pressures of Japan's enterprise ontology compel youths to credentialise through prestige-graded private education, and the for-profit 'shadowed' learning providers facilitating admission to these institutions and, potentially, choice employment beyond them.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Self, Foucault, higher education, human capital, internationalization, Japan

The mass marketization of higher education (HE) draws our attention toward the normative impact of neoliberalism on global flows in people, practice, and policy. Adopting a critical stance, Giroux (2014) claims that a five-decade "war" on HE sustains economic Darwinism, prioritizing "personal responsibility over larger social forces" (p. 1). Subsumed within the neoliberal ideologies of personal choice and meritocratic competition, the credential ladder (Lauder et al., 2012) rewards those who 'choose' to submit to the market when acquiring the qualifications, dispositions, and skills necessary for economic growth. Against this background, HE constitutes an implicit social contract (Sandeman, 2022; Smith & Colpitts, 2022), assumed by subjects as they struggle to carve out a competitive edge within the knowledge economy. More specifically, the 'choice' to enter HE manifests "via the rational, autonomous, responsible behaviours and dispositions of a free, prudent, active Subject: a Subject we can identify as the entrepreneurial Self" (Kelly, 2006, p. 18).

In the case of Japan, two decades of relentless neoliberal reform have transformed a HE system once deemed “meritocratic” (Fujita, 2000, p. 43) into a site for nurturing human resources contributing to the nation’s future economic success (MEXT, 2014, 2018). In this regard, Japan is a prototypical “degreeocracy” wherein prestige-graded qualifications govern the potential for upward social mobility (Dubin, 2023; Okada, 2001; Samuell, 2023). Indeed, the premise that Japanese corporations focus their recruitment on the nation’s ‘élite’ colleges is, at this stage, inarguable (Smith, 2022a). Given that it prioritizes 37 brand-name colleges driving Japan’s human capital output, the Top Global University Project (TGUP) represents one such policy. Thus, taking an idiographic stance rooted in Foucault’s (2004) *entrepreneurial Self*, this article seeks to understand the lived experiences of TGUP students as they navigate Japan’s enterprise society, specifically by addressing the following question: how does Japan’s neoliberal educational domain govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?

Literature Review

By investigating the subjective impact of neoliberal educational reform on TGUP learners, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the panoptic mechanisms of tension and accommodation upholding Japan’s enterprise ontology. While a substantial corpus explores the links between Japanese Selfhood and educational outcomes (see: Inoue, 2007; Okura Gagné, 2020; Yamane et al., 2020), empirical research detailing the entrepreneur-as-project in the explicitly Foucauldian terms detailed above remains comparatively sparse. Consequently, this thesis project builds upon my ongoing studies on Japanese tertiary education reform, including several inquiries detailing the impact of TGUP on the reproduction of wealth (Smith, 2022a, 2023; Smith & Colpitts, 2022; Smith & Samuell, 2022) and a pluralistic investigation of East Asian HE reform more broadly, wherein Bourdieu’s *habitus-capital-field* ‘thinking tools’ supported Foucault’s entrepreneurial Selfhood in assessing the symbolic capital of global neoliberalism’s skill-based agenda (Smith, 2022b). Certainly, policy analysis of “the processes by which education is (further) reduced to strengthening pre-existing power relations” (Smith, 2022b, p. 1) presents *the* common thread running throughout this body of research. Looking beyond my output and, more pertinently, towards *this* journal, Ivanova (2021) recently drew upon Critical Discourse Analysis to explore Japanese colleges hosting international students. From a neoliberal perspective, this ‘imported diversity’ allows prestigious universities to cosmopolitanize learners locally, which, in turn, may prove valuable during job hunting—conclusions aligning with my general research intent and the purpose of TGUP more broadly. Moreover, Ivanova’s (2021) description of a “potential threat and disruption to ‘smooth’ and ‘harmonious’ functioning of the Japanese society” (p. 47)—albeit within the context of inbound internationalization—lies at the very heart of internalized pressures for Japanese learners to embody entrepreneurial subjectivity. Indeed, rejection of this inherited (and, for that matter, *unsolicited*) social contract not only risks one’s future earning potential but actively renounces the Confucian cultural axiom of a credential-based enterprise (Ying, 2020). As such, this study hopes to contribute to the vital work on Japanese HE published in this journal.

Nonaka and Phillips (2017), too, seek research detailing “student motivations and impacts of international engagement when considering the efficacy of government-initiated internationalization efforts” (pp. 16-17). In this regard, the need to detail the experiences and choices of TGUP learners in a globally-focused college, does much to address a call originating in this very article. Indeed, Nonaka and Phillips (2017) stress the importance of “listen[ing] to the often-absent voices of students and teachers at the height of such *kokusaika* [internationalization] efforts today” (p. 17), further connecting the literature to this study’s idiographic intent. Moving past the Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education, debates on the neoliberalization of Japanese HE have expanded to include a range of ideological, political, and sociological concerns. Indeed, the Japanese marketization of HE has sparked much scholarly discussion since first emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Mukawa, 2009, p. 414), particularly within the context of globalization reform (see: Dubin, 2023; Kubota & Takeda, 2020; Samuell, 2023; Sandeman, 2022; Smith, 2022b; Yamane et al., 2020). Drawing on “neoliberal discourses” (Horiguchi et al., 2015, p. 3), HE locally is strongly oriented toward meeting industrial and economic policy concerns. Certainly, a consensus between Japan’s educational and vocational sectors over school-to-work transitions is widely reported, with Uehara (2016) noting the expectation that colleges “achieve a rapid transformation of their students from ‘children’ who lack essential social know-how into functional ‘grown-ups’”. Thus, Japanese HE socializes entrepreneurialism as much as it does credentialize (Smith, 2022a).

From this perspective, Kelly (2006) describes “individuals as being responsible for conducting themselves, in the business of life, as an enterprise, a project, a work in progress” (p. 18). Understanding the (re)conceptualization of subjects as imperfect units of human capital (Han, 2017) represents the ‘golden thread’ woven throughout this phenomenological project. By studying the influence of neoliberalism on educational and vocational transition points, I hope to understand lived experience of Japan’s enterprise society, as manifested through educational reform. Indeed, as mentioned previously,

few studies have drawn on Foucault *empirically* within this context. Nevertheless, Okura Gagné (2020) drew on entrepreneurial Selfhood to explore Japanese corporate reform and employee self-management skills, concluding that neoliberal subjectivities remain “contingent upon the multiscalar historical and cultural contexts of work, responsibility, and risk” (p. 455). Additionally, Yamane et al. (2020) used large-scale surveys to determine that entrepreneurial Selfhood couples with positive views of workplace performance in the Japanese and American contexts. Ogawa (2013), meanwhile, analyzed lifelong learning policies in Japan and how they create a new balance of responsibility between the state and the individual. Ogawa’s work, while lacking a phenomenological basis, best aligns with the intent of my investigation. While the three studies detailed here fail to incorporate idiographic accounts of Japan’s enterprise society, their emic perspectives proved invaluable in guiding my project. Overall, while the application of Foucault’s theory to Japanese HE is broadening, there remains a gap in the academic literature that I seek to bridge.

Conceptual Framework: Foucault’s Entrepreneurial Self

The above research question guides this inquiry, but *why* is it significant to international HE? According to Kelly (2006), the policies and discourses upholding neoliberalism reveal much about “whom” or, perhaps more pointedly, “what” graduates should be upon entering the labor force: entrepreneurs of the Self (Foucault, 2004). Notably, entrepreneurs are autonomized and responsibilized human capital instilled with the capacity to conduct themselves as enterprises. In this regard, entrepreneurialism manifests as an epistemic and ethical “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1995, p. 23) or a “common-sense” (Mendes, 2023, p. 26) ideology dictating the characteristics of the productive (and, hence, ‘responsible’) citizen deserving of high-level employment and financial compensation commensurate to that status. Thus, inflections between HE policy and market conditions engender a system governing autonomous, rational, and accountable subjects (Kelly, 2006), allowing governments to do so implicitly and without force (Smith, 2022b). Indeed, this pivot to individualism (Bourdieu, 1998) permits States to “govern at a distance” (Rose, 2000, p. 323), with human capital viewed as “economically self-interested subjects” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314), uniquely qualified to assess and *act upon* their wants and needs.

By recasting society as an economically Darwinist arena, differentiations between the ‘strong’ and ‘weak,’ ‘deserving’ and ‘underserving,’ ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ take root, undermining collective accountability for social inequality. Indeed, this discursive landscape ignores intricate, interconnected networks of inclusion and exclusion that help or hinder entrepreneurial Selfhood. It follows that ‘losing’ units of human capital which fail to secure ‘proper’ transitions to prestigious corporations do so because of their inherent failings (Costas Batlle, 2019). Thus, skill-orientated productivity, rationalized, reinforced, and reproduced as credential-based “individual biographical projects” (Kelly, 2006, p. 24), socializes the common-sense perception of market orthodoxy. Indeed, “one of the critical manoeuvres at work in the globalizing practices of neoliberalism involves convincing us of its inevitability” (McKenzie, 2012, p. 167). That being said, this inquiry concedes that the dispositions prototypical to human capital-as-enterprise—rationality, autonomy, responsibility, active citizenship, *entrepreneurialism* (Kelly, 2006)—are not, in and of themselves, “corrosive” (Costas Batlle, 2019); for some, the potential economic and social advantages produced through these behaviours are substantial. Rather, the struggle to achieve entrepreneurial Selfhood through a taken-for-granted yet marginalizing system of prestige-graded education creates a cost to the public good that is far more extensive.

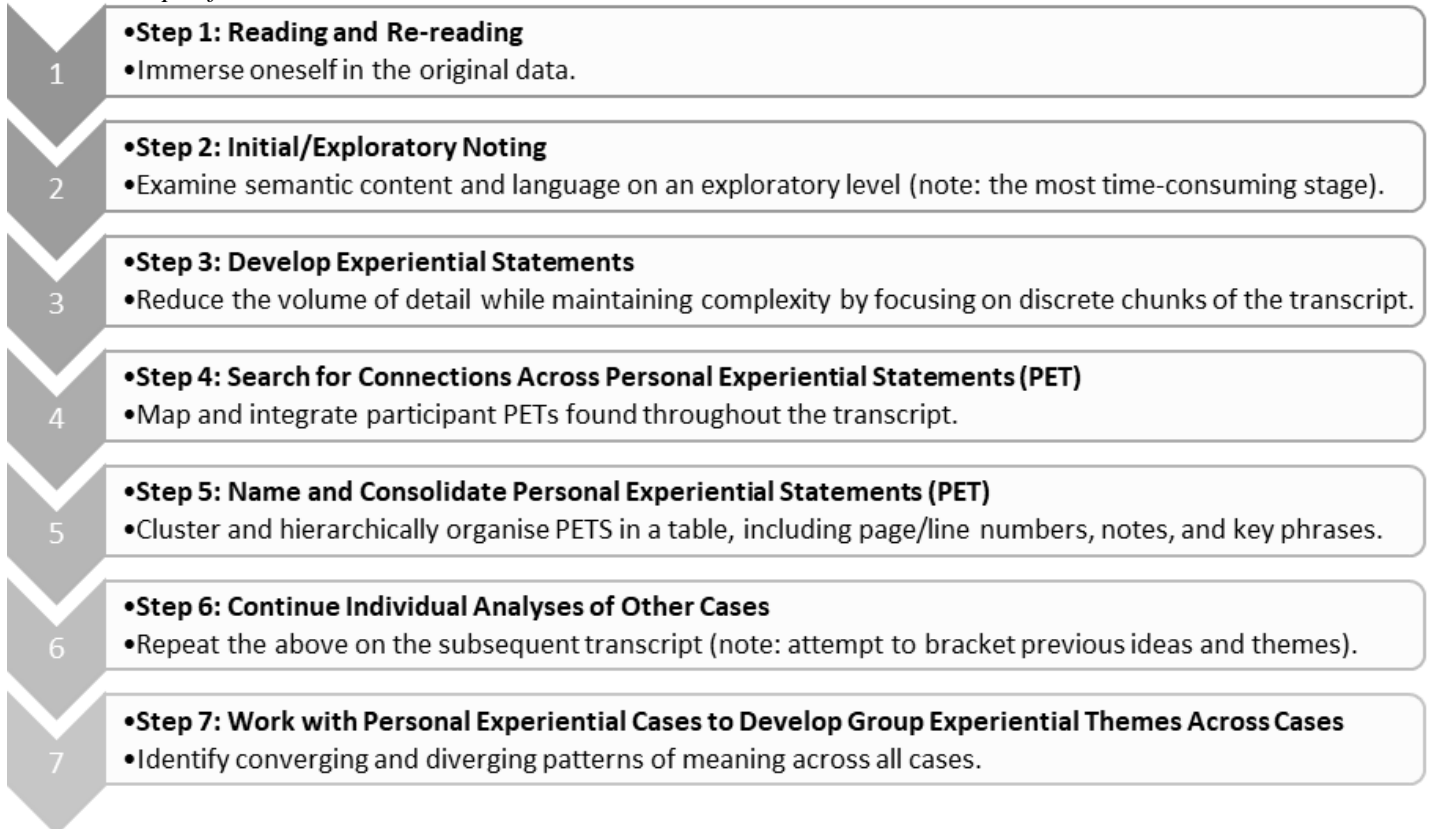
Methodology

In keeping with the qualitative focus of this project, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is used to investigate the subjective experiences of TGUP learners and, more importantly, the meaning-making that results from their experiences of entrepreneurial Selfhood. Following Smith & Eatough (2012), researchers and participants alike remain “actively engaged in interpreting the events, objects, and people in their lives” (p. 441). Consequently, phenomenological reduction remains central to IPA, calling for a ‘stripping away’ of researcher judgment through bracketing or attempting to suspend preconceptions through reflection. In doing so, IPA acknowledges the inevitability of bias, viewing it not as a barrier to interpretation but as something to be engaged with “fruitfully for the purpose of understanding” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 195). Here, IPA draws on homogenous samples, whereby participants share closely-defined characteristics, with saturation achieved upon identifying meaningful points of comparison and contrast between participant accounts (Past & Smith, 2023; Smith et al., 2022). As part of this research project, all nine participants were Japanese international studies majors aged 19-22 who were, as of Q2 2023, enrolled in a TGUP college, having undertaken most of their education until that point within Japan. Their age, gender, grade, degree and English levels remained flexible. Participants had an English proficiency at CEFR B2–C1 level (upper-intermediate to advanced), with a gendered ratio of six females to three males broadly reflecting the host institution’s demographic breakdown.

Regarding exclusion criteria, meanwhile, learners who could not provide informed consent or were unwilling or unable to be audio recorded were disregarded as good practice. Indeed, following Harris (2010), the ability to provide informed consent remains critical to ethical research practice more broadly and must be accounted for per the 2005 UK Mental Capacity Act, which The University of Bath, as my doctoral school, is required to uphold. Upon signing multilingual (Japanese-English) informed consent forms, each participant was given verbal and written assurance that answers would not affect their educational outcomes and that all responses would be kept anonymous and confidential. Additionally, to challenge the inequitable educator-student dynamic, interviewees were invited to determine their respective sessions' language, location, and time. Face-to-face interviews used the semi-structured approach rated exemplary by IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2017). These 90–120-minute audio-recorded sessions used non-directive strategies to elicit a natural style that promoted open communication; these techniques included using a flexible interview guide, taking few notes, and invoking a natural discussion style using non-dichotomous questions. After the initial interviewing, shorter (typically 30-minute) follow-up sessions provided clarity ahead of theory-building, with both stages providing 19 hours of content across 18 sessions, with the subsequent speed of transcription aligned with Smith et al.'s (2022) recommendation of seven hours per one hour of recorded content. Each transcript was then returned to its respective participant to confirm accuracy prior to analysis. Finally, data analysis follows Smith et al.'s (2022) seven-stage IPA process, as detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The seven steps of IPA



Note. Adapted from Smith et al. (2022) and Past and Smith (2023).

Findings

Based on interview results, it is apparent that entrepreneurial Selfhood takes root at an alarmingly young age. Indeed, while data analysis remains, at this stage, incomplete, a tentative canvassing of initial and follow-up interview transcripts reveals that TGUP learners, in this instance, make agentive and rational decisions on their academic and vocational pathways from as young as elementary school. In a nested terrain of shadow education, New Public Management, and hyper-competitive credentialism, HE represents the final step towards ‘proper’ social adulthood: globally-orientated human capital. Against this background, learners make tactical decisions not only on the prestige-graded level of their junior high schools but the for-profit cram schools facilitating transitions to brand-name high schools, universities, and choice employment beyond them. Additional tactics include the exploitation of Japan’s ‘escalator’ system, wherein university corporations provide primary and secondary education options, which, for all intents and purposes, *assure* admittance to prestigious HE, irrespective of a student’s academic achievement. Of course, given the private nature of this system, such transitions remain limited to learners from households possessing the requisite economic capital to ensure enrollment. If this pathway remained out of reach, learners sought access through alternative means, including the ‘recommendation’ system, which, as with ‘escalator’ students, circumvented Japan’s rigorous system of ‘exam hell.’ Indeed, of the nine TGUP learners interviewed, only one took the ‘traditional’ route of entrance examinations. Notwithstanding their respective journeys towards ‘élite’ HE, all participants reported shadow education expenditure to meet the demands of Japan’s enterprise ontology. Consequently, we may, at this stage, interpret the ‘correct’ academic credentials, experiences, and outcomes as segregated between rich and poor, holding normative implications for the capacity of *all* Japanese citizens to embody the rational, autonomous, and responsible behaviours contributing to neoliberal subjectivity (Kelly, 2006).

Expected Contributions to International Higher Education Research

It bears repeating that the outcomes detailed here remain tentative; yet, even at this early stage, one can envision the expected contributions of this project to discussions on access to ‘élite’ HE and, more pertinently, the role of education in forging ‘units’ of human capital. Indeed, the findings of this project hold implications not only for the Japanese context but *all* settings exploiting ostensibly ‘meritocratic’ (yet, by their very nature, inequitable) learning pathways to enact credential-based internationalization policy. As argued recently (see: Dubin, 2023; Samuell, 2023; Sandeman, 2022; Smith, 2022a, 2023), the East Asian educational model, in particular, remains anchored to private schooling, shadow education, highly-competitive entrance examinations, and costly English language learning, thereby serving to reproduce economic privilege across generations. Nonetheless, we must *also* appreciate that those rewarded by neoliberal hierarchy remain subjugated to its excessive industry; for “internationalization as a correlate of neoliberal governmentality—as a symbolic technology of (re)production—subjugates all whom it touches” (Smith, 2022b, p. 9). Although learner agency in this process has been thoroughly debated within international HE research, there remains a striking gap in empirical (specifically phenomenological) *Foucauldian* inquiry, notably in East Asian settings. This project contributes to the literature by unpacking the lived experiences of TGUP learners and their ongoing struggles to accommodate Japanese neoliberalism. This is not to say, however, that this study’s findings may not be generalized to alternative national contexts; marketization remains, at its heart, varied, pluralistic, and borderless. Thus, it is hoped that by contributing further to discussions on human capital theory and neoliberal policy reform, academics place this project’s initial (and, in time, final) contributions within and across diverse HE contexts.

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