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Entrepreneurs of the Self: Understanding Neoliberal Governance in Japanese Education

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Entrepreneurs of the Self: Understanding Neoliberal Governance in Japanese Education

Michael D. Smith

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education

University of Bath
Department of Education

October 2024

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Michel Foucault: *Schools serve the same social functions as prisons and asylums.*

Foucault's Mum: *You're still going.*

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Keep it foolish.

Mike

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS USED

CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

GET: Group Experiential Themes

GPA: Grade Point Average

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

HS: High School

IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

JHS: Junior High School

MEXT: (The Japanese) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

NPM: New Public Management

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PET: Personal Experiential Themes

SA: Study Abroad

SDFS: School District Free System

TGUP: Top Global University Project

TOEIC: Test of English for International Communication

WIS: Western International School

WSHS: Western Senior High School

WU: Western University

GLOSSARY OF JAPANESE TERMS USED

Japanese Term	English Translation
<i>Daigaku Nyūgaku Kyōtsū Tesuto</i>	(Lit. “university admissions common test”) the national entrance examination for Japanese universities. Introduced in 2021.
<i>(Daigaku Nyūshi) Sentā Shiken</i>	(Lit. “National Center Test for University Admissions”) the former national entrance examination for Japanese universities. Used from 1989 to 2020.
<i>Esukareitā Gakkō</i>	(Lit. “escalator school”) private schools that allow students to rise to the next grade and level without taking entrance exams. Escalator schools may theoretically educate from kindergarten to post-doctoral level.
<i>Gakureki</i>	Academic background. Commonly associated with the <i>gakureki filter</i> , the non-transparent screening of job applicants based on their alma mater’s brand value.
<i>Gakureki-shakai</i>	(Lit “academic society”) the Japanese term for an excessively education-conscious society; academic meritocracy.
<i>(Gakushū) Juku</i>	Japan’s pervasive, fee-paying shadow education institutions/cram schools. Often used to prepare learners for high school entrance examinations.
<i>Gurōbaruka</i>	Globalisation.
<i>Hensachi</i>	(Lit “deviation value”) The score used to measure student and institutional academic performance. Scaled to mean of 50, with a standard deviation of 10.
<i>Keidanren</i>	(<i>Nippon Keizai-dantai Rengōkai</i>) Japan Federation of Economic Organizations, established in 1946.
<i>Kejime</i>	(Lit. “distinction” or “differentiation”) to know social “rights” from “wrongs”.
<i>Kosei</i>	Individuality.
<i>Seinen</i>	Young adult; adolescence (esp. <i>social</i> adolescence). Typically, from late-teens-to-early-twenties. However, this may extend to one’s late twenties.
<i>Shakaijin</i>	(Lit. “societal person”) working adults; fully-fledged members of society.
<i>Shiken jigoku</i>	(Lit. “exam hell”) Japan’s highly-competitive testing culture.

<i>Shōnen/ Shōjo</i>	<i>Shōnen</i> (male), <i>Shōjo</i> (female). A youngster; a student in primary or secondary school (aged 7–18).
<i>Shūkatsu utsu</i>	The depression triggered by the stress of job hunting; a growing concern in discussions of mental health, particularly among university seniors.
<i>Shūshoku katsudō (Shūkatsu)</i>	(Lit. “job hunting”; commonly shortened to the compound <i>shūkatsu</i>) Japan’s prolonged and rigorous system of graduate recruitment.
<i>(Shiteikou) Suisen</i>	(Commonly shortened to <i>suisen</i>) A process whereby a high school advocates for a student to facilitate their acceptance into a preferred university.
<i>Suisen-jo</i>	The letter of recommendation provided by teachers and used by students to gain entry to their preferred school.
<i>Yutori-kyōiku</i>	(Lit. “leeway education”) An initiative aimed at ‘relaxing’ the curriculum functioning alongside sweeping of deregulation reform. Commonly translated as “relaxed” or “no-pressure education”.
<i>Wa</i>	Harmony; peace; Japanese-style.

ABSTRACT

Abstract: This thesis explores the educational trajectories of Japanese students at an ‘élite’—and, thus, highly prestigious—Top Global University Project (TGUP) institution. Within Japan’s ‘enterprise society’, neoliberal reform scaffolds educational transitions, with few, if any, existing studies tracing Japanese character-building in terms of lived market subjectivities—a gap that this project, in part, seeks to address. Drawing on Foucault’s governmentality and operationalised through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), findings indicate that neoliberal trajectories are shaped by three broad aspects: strategic awareness and choice during educational transitions; the competitive culture fostered by shadow education, quantification, and the race to secure ‘élite’ higher education; and the regionalised and performative aspects of vocational recruitment. Placing these themes within Japanese society’s ‘bigger picture’, learner testimonies underscore the pervasive influence of neoliberalism within Japanese education, emphasising self-discipline, competitiveness, and marketability. Specifically, as learners transition from *shōnen/shōjo* (youth) to *seinen* (social adolescence) and *shakaijin* (social adulthood), the pressure to conform to market-driven demands for ‘functional’ human capital intensifies. As such, participants navigate the system pragmatically, focusing on personal gains and market competitiveness. In doing so, they internalise entrepreneurial values, where educational success is essential for economic and social validation.

Key words: Neoliberal governmentality; entrepreneurial self; higher education; Japan; Foucault

INTRODUCTION

Background

Following Japanese education's shift toward neoliberalism (Hashimoto, 2013), economic and ideological agendas converge to rationalise learning as ongoing 'projects' borne by self-regulating human capital. Subsumed under the pretence of meritocratic competition, the credential ladder (Lauder et al., 2012) rewards the skills and qualifications necessary for fiscal growth. Thus, the intersection of education and marketisation emerges as a system for governing autonomous, rational, and responsible subjects (Kelly, 2006) and for the Japanese State to do so indirectly and without force. In upholding global trade and finance, however, it is also reasonable to surmise that rational choices to accommodate the knowledge economy remain contingent as opposed to 'free' (Smith, 2021). Yet, we should remain vigilant in rationalising neoliberalism solely as hegemony. While capitalism shapes geopolitics, it is also *shaped by* the socio-cultural conditions of its host setting. Ong (2007) and Wacquant (2012), for instance, assert there is no singular 'big-N' but an inestimable number of 'small-n' neoliberalisms, each invoking epistemic regimes of truth for rendering subjects governable (Foucault, 1979). Thus, while the nexus of free marketisation and credentialism mediates the individual and society, agency and structure, power and knowledge, it does so fluidly and amorphously. Incorporating Foucault's (2007, p. 108) *governmentality*—"a series of specific governmental apparatuses on the one hand [and, on the other] to the development of a series of knowledges"—within a phenomenological analysis of Japanese education, this thesis explores one such 'small-n' context.

Specifically, the *Top Global University Project (TGUP)* presents as a market-oriented reform given its prioritisation of the 37 'élite' universities driving Japan's academic and human capital outputs (Smith, 2021). Considering the absence of empirical inquiries on the subject, understanding the lived, contractual implications borne by learners subjected to educational marketisation constitutes the 'golden thread' woven throughout this thesis. While 'small-n' practices vary, neoliberalism's technology of responsabilisation—of individualising the social (Mead et al., 2022)—is broadly consistent. In Japan, the presumed value of economic liberalisation to societal efficiency enables a hands-off ethos, where, through appeals to individual competitiveness, State influence on social institutions, including education, gradually diminishes (Nitta, 2008). By governing "at a distance" (Rose, 2000, p. 323), deregulation, privatisation, and corporatisation take root, with Japanese citizens interpreted as "economically self-interested subjects" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314) uniquely qualified to evaluate and act upon their needs. This pivot to individualism (Bourdieu, 1998) encourages narrow self-interest, eroding collective and State-level accountability for social maladies by reframing society as an economically Darwinist arena comprising 'winners' and 'losers'. As such, neoliberalism's influence over Japanese social domains and, more pointedly, the governance of economic subjectivities requires academic scrutiny (i.e., Okura Gagné, 2020; Yamane et al., 2020).

Considering annual costs in higher education (HE) have increased by as much as 700% in the past two decades (Armstrong, 2021), it is apparent that the United Nations (1966) recommendation for HE to "be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education" (p. 5) is

disregarded by the majority of its 71 signatories. England, the United States, Canada, Korea, and *Japan* agreed to the above as part of a covenant for universalised socio-economic rights, yet represent the five most expensive HE systems globally (OECD, 2021). Wealth-based polarisation notwithstanding, the hyper-competitive logic of ‘meritocratic’ education pressures all but a select few Japanese citizens to ascend the credential ladder, for “as opportunities for education increase, they are proving harder to cash in” (Brown, 2003, pp. 149-150). That is not to say that our gaze should be directed solely at HE; institutions at all levels of Japan’s education system reinforce a ‘survival of the fittest’ corollary, competing for funding and learners, with a school’s respective prestige guiding consumers to choose the provider that best suits their needs. Here, quasi-marketisation holds normative implications for institutional practice and the very purpose of education. As such, this thesis seeks to assess lived experiences of Japanese governmentality, exploring the role of education in (re)producing economic subjectivities.

Given neoliberalism’s emphasis on self-regulating human capital, I seek to understand how Japanese credentialism, *gakureki*, sustains a hyper-competitive labour market (Tsuneyoshi, 2004; Kariya, 2011; Entrich & Fujihara, 2022). Labelled *gakureki shakai* (credential society), Japan is not necessarily “a ‘what level’ credentialing society so much as a ‘what institution’ credentialing society” (Amano, 1997, p. 56); a prototypical “degreeocracy” wherein prestige-graded qualifications govern social mobility (Okada, 2001). The premise that Japanese corporations focus their recruitment on the nation’s ‘élite’ (read: brand name) colleges is, at this stage, well-noted (Ono, 2007; Smith, 2021), with credentialism an enduring and seemingly immutable part of Japan’s educational landscape (Kobayashi, 1963; Kuramoto & Koizumi, 2018). As renowned businesses recruit alums from prestigious universities, so do these institutions admit graduates from highly-ranked secondary schools. High competition leads enterprising households to seek private and supplementary education to secure a competitive edge at every stage of this process. Nevertheless, while the impact of Japan’s enterprise society on inequality is well-noted (Ogawa, 2013; Okura Gagné, 2020; Kubota & Takeda, 2020), few, if any, studies trace ongoing neoliberal subjectivities (*youth*→*adolescence*→*adulthood*) in Foucauldian terms—a gap this thesis seeks to address. Adopting a critical realist stance premised on ontological realism and epistemological relativism and operationalised through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), I draw upon governmentality to explore the educational transitions and, in consequence, neoliberal character-formation of students enrolled in an ‘élite’ TGUP college.

Research Question and Significance of the Study

As detailed in this thesis’ methodology, I incorporate an inductive, bottom-up idiographic approach focused on exploring individual experiences and meaning-making arising from shared phenomena. As such, this open research question guides my inquiry:

How does Japan’s enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?

But *why* is it important? Discourses supporting neoliberalism reveal much about ‘whom’ or, more accurately, ‘what’ we should become upon entering the workforce. Where Keynesian developmentalism emphasised social altruism, the return to individualism brought about by its displacement venerates the *free, prudent, and active* subject, for “there is no such thing as society but only individuals” (Thatcher in Harvey, 2005). Consequently, Kelly (2006) proposes the *entrepreneurial Self*: “a subject made capable of conducting himself/herself as an enterprise via the vast ensemble of experiences, practices and relations that characterise the processes of governmental self formation” (p. 18). The market emphasis on individualism and competition is problematic from several perspectives. First, and as highlighted by Thatcher’s disregard for collective accountability, it decontextualises and de-historicises, understanding individuals as equally prepared to navigate an uneven playing field. Here, the capacity for enterprise governs one’s ability to succeed within the “neoliberal utopia” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 96), allowing Japan to submit to businessification. This, in turn, repositions its society as a social Darwinian economic arena, itself predicated on rewarding conformity and punishing dissent. Here, neoliberalism demands ‘common sense’ orthodoxies for success, such as incorporating the habits, dispositions, skills, and credentials deemed valuable to the economy. In this context, personhood and the purpose of education transform “largely autonomously into meanings that are structured by the market form” (Kelly, 2006, p. 24).

As noted by Bourdieu (1996, p. 73), economic policy targets ‘élite’ schooling for reform due to its “production of nobility”. Under New Public Management (NPM), Japanese universities are deregulated, privatised, and globalised. However, in a sink-or-swim competitive ecology designed to increase economic utility (Nitta, 2008; Bjork, 2015), the prestige associated with brand-name colleges ensures not only external funding and prioritisation but recognition by economically privileged high school (HS) graduates competing for enrolment and high-paying careers beyond (Ross, 2008). This study takes place at one such college: a *Top Global University Project* institution seeking to produce the human capital positioned to transition into global leadership (Maruko, 2014). This university represents a rational pathway for high-achieving learners to enact idealised visions of future selves. As will be argued, idiographic accounts of college-age learners present opportunities to explore neoliberal institutionalised biographies and understand this crucial transition point before social adulthood. Before pressing forth, it bears highlighting that the capacities accompanying entrepreneurial Selfhood—initiative, autonomy, rationality, responsibility—are neither unwelcome nor fundamentally corrosive (Costas Batlle, 2019). However, narrow conceptions of “performance of exchange relations” (Kelly, 2006, p. 29), whereby the capacity to demonstrate these traits regulates one’s ‘worth’ to capitalist society, present as panoptic mechanisms of discipline, coercion, and control. For “we must all assume an entrepreneurial disposition to this life form. We fail to do so at our own risk” (Kelly, 2006, p. 29). As such, I forge ahead with the understanding that, as “cogs in neoliberalism’s internal machinery” (Telford & Briggs, 2022, p. 64), those benefitting from privileged access to ‘élite’ schooling remain enthralled by the disciplinary technologies of power dictating the terms of economic success. They remain, as with the majority, victims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Introduction

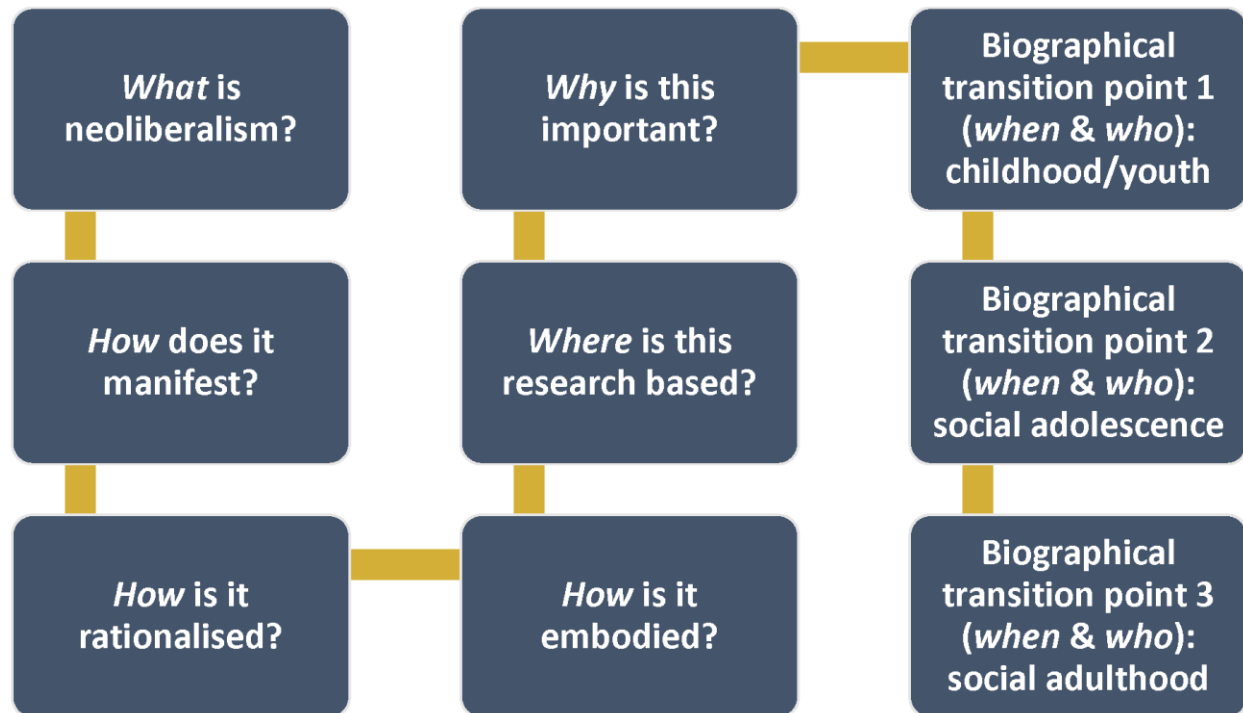
Giroux (2014) describes a war on HE, attesting that five decades of market-oriented reforms support a Darwinist ontology that “privileges personal responsibility over larger social forces” (p. 1). Here, neoliberalism enforces a ‘common sense’ understanding of deregulation, decentralisation, and privatisation as necessary for societal growth. Indeed, two decades of neoliberal reform have transformed Japan’s allegedly “meritocratic” (Fujita, 2000, p. 43) education system into an outcome-focused human capital model predicated on rewarding those contributing to “the further development of Japan as a nation” (MEXT, 2003). As such, the Japanese State takes an increasingly hands-off position, re-interpreting HE as an enterprise realised “via the *rational*¹, *autonomous*, *responsible* behaviours and dispositions of a *free*, *prudent*, *active* Subject: a Subject we can identify as the entrepreneurial Self” (Kelly, 2006, p. 18). From this perspective, education constitutes an implicit social contract borne by *entrepreneurial projects* as they incorporate the skills and credentials necessary for economic growth. Against this background, the following question seeks to uncover lived accounts of Japanese governmentality:

How does Japan’s enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?

As such, this chapter delineates neoliberalism’s philosophical and historical foundations before naming and problematising its governance technologies. Next, it explores the entrepreneurial self as a technology undergirding neoliberal personhood and how it comes to be embodied through panopticism. Upon outlining the conceptual foundation of the study, the present research context will be explored, identifying gaps in available literature before tying neoliberalism to enduring features of Japanese personhood. From here, and only upon ‘building my case’, the educational transition points deemed significant to local culture will be analysed through the lens of governmentality, detailing the social and political terrain guiding entrepreneurial projects. Finally, this chapter will be summarised before returning to the research question to clarify and justify its significance. A flowchart of this chapter’s content is presented in Figure 1 to aid navigation:

¹ Original emphasis throughout.

Figure 1. This chapter’s flow.



Neoliberalism

Naming and Historicising Neoliberalism

Before analysing Japanese education, I must establish *what* neoliberalism—a notoriously enigmatic paradigm (Cottier, 2019)—*is*. Owing to the broad range of phenomena scaffolding its practice, Boas and Gans-Morse (2009, p. 138) describe neoliberalism as a “puzzle”; at once, hegemonic ideology, economic policy framework, and organisational practice. This reading notwithstanding, we may generally understand neoliberalism “as a specific mode of government” (Raaper, 2020, p. 143): the “political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility” (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2). Crucial here are pivots toward individualism (Bourdieu, 1998), wherein States condition “economically self-interested subjects” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314) or human capital best placed to judge their interests and needs. Against this background, the freedom to nurture oneself as an ongoing enterprise is a mechanism of neoliberal legitimation; we deem ourselves not necessarily subjects but lifelong projects: “always refashioning and reinventing ourselves” (Han, 2017, p. 1). As stated, the market conception of the *entrepreneurial project* is central to this thesis. First, however, I will trace the socio-political foundations of neoliberalism—for only then may its influence on Japan’s *gakureki shakai* be understood.

First, I must draw a line between the *classical* and *modern* liberal traditions. Classical liberalism is best understood as a political-philosophical doctrine advocating economic freedom

and individual liberty through limited governmental power. Contrary to the modern understanding of the term, liberalism takes a hands-off stance, viewing taxation and State involvement in individuals' lives negatively while favouring deregulation (Dickerson et al., 2013). Thus, one may trace the origins of neoliberalism to classic liberal figures, including John Locke and Adam Smith, with the former's view of liberty "being preserved and enlarged by conformity to rational law" (Gray, 2010, p. 62)—humans as moral, logical, and voluntary agents—central to the classical concept of freedom. Smith's (1776) "invisible hand" metaphor, which directs society to work toward a communal good as an incidental outcome of efforts to maximise personal gain, provides the moral imperative for accumulating wealth through rational self-interest. While not coining the term, Smith (1776) also emphasised the value of *laissez-faire*, unrestricted trade, free-marketisation, human capital, and the bootstraps logic of upward socio-economic mobility through labour—for it is "the natural effort of every individual to better his own condition".

Consequently, Eagleton-Pierce (2016) notes three themes upholding neoliberalism: *individualism*, *universalism*, and *meliorism*. Individualism represents the moral and ontological prioritisation of the subject, wherein "the valorization of choice and competitiveness [act] as guiding principles for societal organization" (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016, p. 20). Universalism, meanwhile, may be understood as circumventing or transcending limits, be they physical, economic, cultural, or political—exemplified by capitalism's goal to "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, and establish connections everywhere" (Marx & Engels, 1998/1848, p. 39). Finally, and most pertinent to education, is meliorism, wherein individuals seek to remake and *improve* themselves. Meliorism is neoliberalism's 'ace up the sleeve' for sustaining the knowledge economy. A pragmatic melioristic posture "with its core focus on improvability through intelligent labour" (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016, p. 23) fits within the meritocratic lure of social mobility through universalism (Lauder, 2022)—a fundamental tenant of Confucian-Japanese hierarchy (Fujita, 2000; Ying, 2020)—and the right to enact a meaningful degree of agency during this process.

While classical and modern liberalism share concerns for freedom, there remains a distinction in their respective typologies. Calling on the works of Isaiah Berlin (2002), liberty (Berlin highlights "freedom" and "liberty" as interchangeable) implies *both* a positive and negative conception. Positive liberty involves autonomous internalisation, and negative the absence of externalisation. In its positive manifestation, freedom consists of one's fundamental right to autonomously enact self-mastery within the rule of law (Berlin, 2002, pp. 178-183). Given the implications for equality of opportunity through welfare, human rights, and social justice, State-mediated positive freedom may be associated with modern/social liberals (Collington, 2018, p. 36). Conversely, negative freedom comprises a lack of external barriers, obstacles, and constraints, including the right to do as one wishes with minimal governmental interference, thereby aligning with classical liberalism (Gray, 2010). At this point, one must note that while classical and modern liberalism remain distinct, the former provides the foundations for the latter, with the philosophy of John Stuart Mill serving as an intellectual bridge between the two traditions (Gray, 2010). Yet, a displacement of the theories of another English economist, John Maynard Keynes, laid the foundations for *neo-liberalism* to take hold.

Following the Great Depression of the 1930s, Keynes advocated for fiscal and monetary reform to mitigate the negative social outcomes of economic recession. The Keynesian consensus held that States must act as unequivocal guardians of the public good and were obliged to supplement and regulate market forces through nationalisation. By the end of World War II, Keynesian developmentalism and its emphasis on the welfare state “transformed the distribution of wealth and power between classes, closing the inequality gap that had become so pronounced from the late nineteenth century through to the 1920s” (Hickel, 2016, p. 142). Indeed, Yoshioka and Kawasaki (2016, p. 3) note Japan’s “combination of several policies based on Keynesian economics” during the nation’s post-war boom. As noted by Cockett (1995), however, intellectuals with free-market sympathies convened as early as 1947 to sow doubt over Keynesianism. Despite initially exerting little impact on the global economic order (Dados & Connell, 2018; Harvey, 2005), the Mont Pelerin Society, which counted Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Karl Popper among its ranks, soon contributed to an *evolution* of classical liberalism: *neo-liberalism*. As noted by Davidson (2018), conditions for unrestrained capitalism were partially met by the 1973-1974 stock market crash and its resultant aftermath (including mass unemployment, stagflation, and a decline in asset values), as well as neo-imperialistic activities in South America, which emerged as the crucible of neoliberal experimentation.

One may view the South American genesis of neoliberalism as an effort to supplant positive liberty. Hayek’s distaste for Keynesian developmentalism stemmed from his belief that it inevitably led to totalitarianism; true freedom, he argued, “could only be secured by unfettered market capitalism” (Hickel, 2016, p. 144). Nonetheless, it is inarguable that the US-backed neoliberalisation of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and, most notoriously, Pinochet’s Chile led to repressive military juntas taking power. In each instance, the Chicago School principles of Hayek’s Mont Pelerin cohort, Milton Friedman, guided socio-economic reform; forces enacted through the circumvention of democratic government “and a state terror programme that was robust enough to disable resistance wherever it emerged” (Hickel, 2016, p. 144). Yet, the creeping influence of neoliberalism would soon extend beyond the continent when, during the 1980s, Friedman came to advise the Reagan and Thatcher administrations—political figures strongly associated with market-orientated reform (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). But what, exactly, *was* Friedman advising? Fortunately (for this study), he provides a philosophical and practical template for the competitive free-market society in 1962’s *Capitalism and Freedom*.

Here, Friedman (2002) argues in favour of unfettered economic freedom and eliminating trade barriers, graduated tax rates, currency controls, labour regulations, social welfare, government spending, and public schooling. As highlighted, however, despite their shared ontological and ideological bases, we must remain vigilant not to interpret neoliberalism as a *return* to classical liberalism but as a *radical evolution*. Following the ‘failure’ of the post-war Keynesian welfare state—it bears emphasising that Shimomura Osamu, the “father” of Japan’s post-war “economic miracle”, drew heavily on Keynesian theory throughout this period (Horiuchi & Otaki, 2017)—classical liberalism’s demand for liberty before the law was supplemented by a logic of rational competitiveness, whereby subjects “accept reality” (Becker, 1976, p. 167) when “responding systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment” (Foucault, 2008, p. 270). Here, we may observe the paradox inherent to the subject-

as-project: at once free of external limitations yet eminently governable. Giroux (2014), meanwhile, notes that, despite a theoretical dedication to open competition, neoliberalism reinforces stratification by fostering “a mode of public pedagogy that privileges the *entrepreneurial subject*² while encouraging a value system that promotes self-interest” (p. 1). Here, neoliberalism consumes positive freedom, subordinating the liberty of the worker and consumer at the heart of Keynesian economics to the freedom of enterprise (Lazzarato, 2009). Thus, the question of how neoliberalism, despite its apparent negative implication for stratification, came to be accepted as the dominant paradigm of Japanese education must be addressed. To do so, I will unpack and problematise the technologies of neoliberal governance.

Neoliberal Governmentality and its Technologies of Power

Before explicitly addressing the neoliberal structures of Japanese education, I lay down the Foucauldian theory undergirding my analysis. Governmentality, as neologised by Foucault (1979), derives from *government* and *rationality* and symbolises the ensemble of “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target: population, as its principal form of knowledge: political economy” (p. 20). Governmentality is the ‘art’ and ‘conduct’ of rule: the socio-political logics and mechanisms producing governable subjects. Consequently, Foucault’s heuristic is notionally consistent with Bourdieu’s (1984) genetic-structuralist symbolic violence and Gramsci’s (1992/1947) neo-Marxist cultural hegemony. While these theories are valuable for exploring hierarchy, governmentality better equips us to finely trace the logic, techniques, and mechanisms of power that underlie Japan’s *gakureki shakai*. Specifically, how subjects come to accept rule *not only* through the top-down influence of the Japanese State but also the wide range of disciplinary institutions—schools, workplaces, government bodies, etc.—undergirding its society (Foucault, 1995). Knowledge, too, may be understood as a technology of governmentality, one that is constrictive *and* productive. Indeed, power-knowledge is inextricably linked: “knowledge is the application of power and power a function of knowledge” (Smith, 2021, p. 15).

Power-knowledge manifests positively when subjects reproduce discourses that come to be internalised by populations. Placing the Self into a productive relationship with subjectivity presents a more efficient and natural means of governance as taken-for-granted ‘truths’ enable the public to govern itself while simultaneously opening it up to new patterns of behaviour and thought (Foucault, 1980). Given the market emphasis on self-reliance, self-limitation, and free and active conduct (Joseph, 2014), we can now recognise the importance of governmentality to neoliberalism. Additionally, while governmentality widens our understanding of power beyond the hierarchical authority of the State, an appreciation of neoliberalism *as* governmentality highlights the former’s often capricious nature, enacted through an “ongoing hybridisation of neoliberal practices and ideas with local conditions and forms” (Wacquant, 2012, p. 70). As with neoliberalism, there is no ‘singular’ governmentality but countless, each requiring a specific ensemble of tactics, procedures and logics harmonising with the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 1977) of a host society. Earlier, Boas and Gans-Morse (2009, p. 138) presented neoliberalism as a “puzzle” owing to its “multidimensional nature, strong normative connotations, and openness to modification over time”.

² Emphasis added.

In highlighting *how* free-marketisation shapes Japanese society, governmentality, perhaps, allows us to put the pieces of this puzzle together.

Echoing Foucault (1979), Rose et al. (2006) depict economic liberalisation as “an art of governing” arising from the classical assessment of excessive government rather than a “substantiative doctrine of how to govern” (p. 3). Adopting the body politic as its target, governmentality employs a vast assemblage of *technologies* and *rationalities* intended to strengthen our connection to a “society regulated by reference to the market ... a society subject to the dynamic of competition ... an enterprise society” (Foucault, 2008, p. 147). Technologies of power refer to heterogeneous mechanisms “imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired ones” (Rose, 1999, p. 52)—practices that manage society. Rationalities, meanwhile, present the modes of thought and discourse scaffolding (and engendering specific conduct around) said technologies. Through normative patterns of behaviour, rationalities emerge as the natural order of things; thus, it is impossible to study the art of government separate from the conduct of conduct (Foucault, 1982). Foucault’s use of conduct here is deliberate; he refers to the *act* of governance and the patterns of action and behaviour *to be* governed (Hodgson, 2011).

Consequently, one should not view governmentality as wholly repressive but as part of a broader narrative steering ontological and political freedom. Governmentality transfers responsibility to individuals through appeals to liberty; this is but one technology of power. Here, governmentality operates through subtle coercion, nudging subjects towards its enterprise society. Central to this is the self-actualisation of individuals as lifelong entrepreneurial projects, able to govern themselves and conform to market demands. The capacities for self-evaluation, self-regulation, and self-development may be understood as *technologies of the self*: practices by which “human beings come to understand and act upon themselves within certain regimes of authority and knowledge, and by means of certain techniques directed to self-improvement” (Rose et al., 2006, p. 11). Operating through ethical and rational choice, technologies of the Self are discursive mechanisms for internalising what it means to be a ‘good’ or ‘proper’ Japanese neoliberal subject—one governed through credentialism. Foucault (1988a) brackets self-evaluation, regulation, and improvement within the collective scope of *self-esteem*, a technology imprinted on subjectivities based on respect earned by adherence to social norms. The goal of self-esteem as a governmental technology is the inner-realisation of ethical subjects.

Hence, the capacity of the Japanese State to manage the lives of citizens from afar presents as the true ‘invisible hand’ of its economic liberalisation. From Foucault’s (2005) perspective, relations with disciplinary institutions prompt us to analyse and internalise ethical behaviours as we “care for the self” during introspection. One’s subjectivity is self-constituting, establishing oneself as both a passive object and an active searcher in the quest for Selfhood (McGushin, 2011; Raaper, 2019). Contrary to the Marxist reading of hegemony, dominant forces do not wholly impose neoliberalism upon us. Through processes of self-introspection, the ontological power of governmentality disperses, making way for a more authentic realisation (and care) of the Self by circumventing the objectification of the subject. The result is a “calculable man” at once disciplined yet simultaneously “docile” (Foucault, 1995, pp. 135-169). Individuals that, through

the rationality of autonomy, “have been seduced by their own perceived powers of freedom and have, at the same time, let go of significant collective powers” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249). The tendency to live according to established rationalities, termed *normalisation* by Foucault, presents another technology of the Self. Naturally, normalisation operates hand-in-hand with self-esteem, with *shame*—“a valued emotion that is consistent with the Japanese pursuit of relational harmony” (Kirchner et al., 2018, p. 1318)—an ever-present enforcement mechanism.

Rationalities produced by neoliberal actors in Japanese government, industry, and education present as epistemic “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1995, p. 23) intended to function as societal norms. This is troubling from several perspectives. As demonstrated by the displacement of Keynesianism, it is manifestly in the best interests of élites to uphold a predetermined status-quo³. Thus, history tells us that it is also in their best interests to present neoliberalism as the logical, rational, and default form of governance despite a history of economic recession and austerity (further) disadvantaging vulnerable members of society. This leads us back to *shame*, where, through the internalisation of what is upheld as inevitable, “we modify our behaviour in an endless attempt to approximate the normal” (Oksala, 2011, p. 89). Drawing on a Foucauldian-Heideggerian genealogy, Karademir (2013, p. 376) labels normalisation the *anxiety-engendering-truth* at once, historically contingent, performative, and heterogeneous. In this sense, Japanese societal norms align with neoliberal dogma: attend a highly-ranked university, secure well-paying employment, work hard, spend income, sustain the economy, etc. Naturally, this holds normative implications for lifelong entrepreneurial projects. Subjects engage reflexively and continuously in their enterprise; if they fail to meet the terms of this transmissible and unsolicited social contract, they risk failure and *shame* (Kelly, 2006, p. 29).

This leads to our final⁴ technology of the Self: *responsibilisation*. The significance of this technology to neoliberal personhood is, at this point, well-substantiated (i.e., Costas Batlle, 2019; Kelly, 2006; Smith, 2022a). Through its *transformative competencies for 2030*, the OECD—an arm of global neoliberal governance (Smith, 2021)—implores member States, including Japan, to exploit self-esteem, normalisation, and *responsibilisation* during the production of human capital: “taking responsibility is connected to the ability to reflect upon and evaluate one’s own actions in light of one’s experience and education, and by considering personal, ethical and societal goals” (OECD, 2019, p. 2). *Responsibilisation* is crucial to governmentality from several perspectives. First, empowering subjects who are at once ‘responsible’, ‘ethical’, and ‘autonomous’ further connects them to adjacent technologies of the Self. Through self-assessing ethical societal responsibilities, we open ourselves up to *shame*’s normalising effect, which, in turn, regulates our respective degree of self-esteem. Additionally, *responsibilisation* implies that subjects are objectifiable and “calculable” (Foucault, 1995, p. 135). ‘Things’ that, through “modifications artificially introduced into the environment” (Foucault, 2008, p. 270), are to be mechanically evaluated, disciplined, and reproduced as rational economic actors.

³ This is not to say that upward social mobility is unachievable; rather, that ‘trickle-down’ economics is manifestly fallacious. Hickel (2016), for instance, notes that, beginning in the 1980s, the proportion of national income attributed to wealthy Brits and Americans jumped from 6.5% to 13% and 8% to 18%, respectively (p. 144).

⁴ Foucault describes a fourth technology of the Self, *healthism*, which falls beyond the scope of this inquiry.

Following the historical-ideological basis of neoliberalism, responsabilisation reduces the scope of welfarism, wherein the State guides “individuals without at the same time being responsible for them” (Lemke, 2001, p. 201). In essence, responsabilisation repositions social risks (labour relations, unemployment, poverty, etc.) as burdens borne by the individual, as issues of *self-care*. Thus, through rationalities of self-mastery and self-regulation, the impetuses for (and consequences of) failure—of failure to *succeed as an enterprise*—decontextualise. As detailed previously, this pivot to individualism presents a self-fulfilling prophecy that erodes positive freedom and, in reducing individuals to competitive ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, reinterprets humanity as self-serving (Giroux, 2014). Echoing Foucault’s interpretation of self-care as an ethical project, Bourdieu (1998) notes how, through “the gospel of self-help”, responsabilisation creates openings to “‘blame the victim’, who is entirely responsible for his or her own failure” (p. 7). Through the technology of New Public Management (NPM), responsabilisation engenders a Social Darwinist survival-of-the-fittest arena sustained through intense competition.

I will place Japanese education within the scope of NPM shortly; for now, understand that NPM represents an enterprise ontology wherein *every* facet of society, including education, *must* function as a business (Fisher, 2009). Lorenz (2012), meanwhile, describes NPM as the “neoliberal dream of the free-market economy and *homo oeconomicus*⁵” one that “can best be expressed by a formula: free market = competition = best value for money = optimum efficiency” (p. 601). In doing so, NPM emphasises ‘3 Ms’ as guiding principles: *management*, *measurement of performance*, and *market or quasi-marketisation* (Ferlie, 2010). The former decentralises State responsibility to private enterprise, reduces hierarchy and bureaucracy, and rewards specific rather than diffuse performance (Lapunte & Van de Walle, 2020; Schedler & Proeller, 2001). Incentivisation leads us to accountability through performance measurement, wherein organisations pivot to an output orientation based on target agreements. Meeting targets is rewarded through favourable government contracts and competitive grant funding. In contrast, those failing to meet targets may face cuts in subsidies—further reinforcing the survival-of-the-fittest mantra. Funding leads us to market-or-quasi-marketisation, characterised by reductions in public sector input and increased efficiency through competition (Schedler & Proeller, 2001). Here, public and private institutions are encouraged to compete against one another, with the market’s invisible hand guiding rational consumers to select the provider that best suits their needs.

However, public service institutions, including education, do not function through conspicuous market mechanisms such as open pricing (Lorenz, 2012). Thus, *quasi-marketisation*, which substitutes the open market for competitive efficiency, emerges; States offer competitive tendering between the public and private sectors “dependent on their performance, with the formula of money follows choice” (Lapunte & Van de Walle, 2020, p. 467). With regards to Japanese education, NPM takes the form of decentralisation and deregulation, wherein “the objective is to provide sufficient flexibility and local control at the school level that creativity, individual initiative, and *the spirit of entrepreneurship*⁶ will become part of the teaching/learning process” (Muta, 2000, p. 455). Here, outcome-focused measurement manifests through neoliberal

⁵ Original emphasis.

⁶ Emphasis added.

audit culture, including the school league tables that play a significant role in parental/consumer choice (Entrich, 2015). Finally, and as will be discussed, Japanese quasi-marketisation presents as the dominant managerial paradigm of the past two decades, wherein reforms aimed at ‘relaxing’ the education sector intensified academic competition and shadow education expenditure. Before moving forth, however, it bears repeating that the various forces of neoliberal governmentality do not function in isolation; one’s ongoing biographical project is both *technologised* and *rationalised* through an intricate system of political economy: *entrepreneurial Selfhood*.

The Entrepreneurial Self as Neoliberal Subjectivity

In his extensive critique of free-marketisation, Foucault (1979, 1988a) incorporates a Beckerian stance to examine *homo oeconomicus*: a utility-maximising ‘economic man’, at once dependably rational and narrowly self-interested. A leading figure in the Chicago School of political economy, Becker was heavily influenced by Milton Friedman, describing him as “by far the greatest living teacher I have ever had” (Becker in Horn, 2009, p. 141). Additionally, while an early description of human capital may be found in Smith’s (1776) *The Wealth of Nations*, Becker (1993) brought the term to widespread attention. To Becker, “the most radical of the American neoliberals” (Foucault, 2008, p. 269), the economy universalises to incorporate social domains in a systematic attempt to objectify human conduct, action, and decision-making. Indeed, “the economic approach provides a framework applicable to all human behavior—to all types of decisions and to persons from all walks of life” (Becker, 1981, p. ix). Contrary to the logical assumption of bounded rationality, *homo oeconomicus* is the consummate decision-maker, a utility-maximising unit of human capital ideally placed to enact self-interest during the accumulation of wealth. By extending the economic to the social, Becker (1976) holds that objectified “units must accept reality” (p. 167) when responding to external flows and variations in the market. In doing so, the individual, inscribed with its mechanical function, submits itself to economic analysis.

Foucault’s (2008) interpretation of Becker as “radical” is hard to contest. Bourdieu (2005), too, labels Becker’s economic agent both an “anthropological monster” and “the most extreme personification of scholastic fallacy” (p. 209). In classical liberalism’s reading, individual freedom is a prerequisite to rational governance, for constraining liberty would endanger the very foundations of the State (Lemke, 2001). When considering Becker’s reality-accepting manipulable subject, we see that neoliberalism reinterprets freedom as artificially arranged. If an economic agent, irrespective of their capacity for rationality, responds to external stimuli, they open themselves to exploitation—they are eminently controllable. Thus, “from being the intangible partner of *laissez-faire*⁷, *homo oeconomicus* now becomes the correlate of a governmentality” (Foucault, 2008, pp. 270-271). A liberty at once venerated and constrained is inherent to the Beckerian political economy; this guides us to Foucault’s reading of *docility*: subjects who, during introspection, understand themselves as free to enact rational choices yet remain tightly governed. In assuming responsibility for self-care, subjects are simultaneously compelled to conform to market logic: “a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business” (Gershon, 2011, p. 537). *The entrepreneurial self*.

⁷ Original emphasis throughout.

In Kelly's (2006) view, the market emerges not only as a model for regulating the State, economy, and society "but also as a means of governing in these domains via the *rational*⁸, *autonomous*, *responsible* behaviours and dispositions of a *free, prudent, active* Subject: a Subject we can identify as the entrepreneurial Self" (p. 18). Crucially, the entrepreneur is an autonomous individual who, through the vast ensemble of technologies and rationalities upholding neoliberal governance, is imbued with the capacity to conduct themselves as an enterprise. In this regard, entrepreneurialism as an extension of *homo oeconomicus* is a governmental technology, one intrinsically linked to Foucault's (1988a) concepts of normalisation, self-esteem, and responsabilisation. Indeed, entrepreneurialism presents as an ethical and epistemic "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1995, p. 23), a common-sense orthodoxy dictating what it is to be a productive (and, thus, 'good') neoliberal subject. Embedded within an individual's duty for rational self-care is the obligation to manage themselves reflexively to satiate labour market demands. Thus, consistent with Beckerian human capital theory, Urciuoli (2008) and Gershon (2011) note how neoliberal entrepreneurialism presupposes meliorism through accumulating valuable skills, academic qualifications, and professional credentials.

Consonant with Japan's *gakureki shakai*, Bourdieu (1986) notes how credentials produce corresponding degrees of recognition. A degree from a prestigious university is deemed more valuable to the market than one from a lower-ranked institution, for example (Smith, 2021). This is one instance of entrepreneurial conformity, yet one that impacts normalisation, self-esteem, and responsabilisation, and demonstrates how, through regimes of truth, neoliberalism governs via *shame*. If a Japanese learner fails to bolster their 'brand' through 'correct' forms of credentialism, they have manifestly failed in their duty to adhere to social norms and emerge as a responsible neoliberal subject. They have failed to adequately "estimate, calculate, measure, evaluate, discipline, and to judge" (Cruikshank, 1996, p. 233). To Foucault (1988a), there is one logical outcome: self-esteem is forfeit. However, entrepreneurial Selfhood as a technology of neoliberal governmentality fails to reconcile the discriminatory logic upholding stratification. Indeed, through a naïve adherence to merit-based-reward, drives for responsible enterprise actively sustain, if not furtively *endorse*, the Social Darwinist survival-of-the-fittest rationality permeating neoliberalism (Smith, 2021). Considering this socially decontextualised pivot to individualism (Bourdieu, 1998), Japanese education emerges as a contested ground for shaping "a specific mode of control, 'self-management'" (Okura Gagné, 2020, p. 455).

Following Kelly (2006), the enterprise society "sees individuals as being responsible for conducting themselves, in the business of life, as an enterprise, a project, a work in progress" (p. 18). This repositioning of subjects as lifelong *entrepreneurial projects* (Han, 2017) is the 'golden thread' woven throughout this thesis. By exploring the phenomenological impact of neoliberalism on the biographic transition points (*youth*→*adolescence*→*adulthood*) of local university students, I hope to gain idiographic perspectives on the technologies of tension and accommodation sustaining Japan's enterprise society. While a substantial body of work detailing Japanese entrepreneurialism and Selfhood exists (i.e., Inoue, 2007; Okura Gagné, 2020; Yamane et al., 2020), little (if any) *empirical* research explores the subjective entrepreneur-as-project as

⁸ Original emphasis throughout.

understood in Foucauldian terms. Before mapping out Japanese education's neoliberal terrain, however, one must understand governmentality's project-based citizenship. In an extension of Foucault's (1995) technologies of power, Han (2017) argues that the internalisation of governmentality as Self-interpreted liberty constitutes *self-exploitation*. Restoring the Marxist readings of dominance eschewed in Foucault's heuristic, Han (2017) describes the entrepreneurial project as "a beautiful but deceptive illusion that the neoliberal regime maintains in order to exhaust its resources entirely" (p. 28). This is neoliberalism's model technology: the subject "engages in auto-exploitation willingly—and even passionately" (Han, 2017, p. 28).

That the entrepreneur-as-project incorporates desire *and* constraint is irrefutable. However, one must not overlook Foucault's (2015) caution that scholars "take into account the points where the techniques of self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination" (p. 25). Indeed, "the way individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government" (Foucault, 2015, pp. 25-26). As with neoliberalism, we should not view Japanese entrepreneurial projects in absolute terms—as unequivocal symbolic violence or strict hegemonic coercion—but as part of a complex balance between individuals and the technologies assuring self-care. Additionally, monolithic readings of neoliberalism as a *wholly* hegemonic force disregard the hybridised global and regional practices described by Wacquant (2012). Indeed, by provoking *and* responding to market flows, neoliberalism opens itself up to local (re)configuration. By re-interpreting Japanese society in terms of market value, neoliberalism sustains itself by incorporating numerous "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1995, p. 23), upholding Japan's social, political, and economic ecology. This is to say that lived entrepreneurial projects constituted through governmentality remain diverse and innately complex. Thus, rather than the decontextualised agent of calculable utility posited by Becker (1976), I will proceed with Foucault's (2002) interpretation of humanity as intimately related to historical context.

Education-as-Panopticism

To the *subject-as-project*, one's credentialed resources drive social mobility; thus, Japanese schools emerge as social arenas wherein *entrepreneurial selves* are forged. As noted by Costas Batlle (2019), neoliberalism has come under sustained scrutiny concerning "how it appears to reshape what education *is*⁹ or what it means to be a 'good human being'" (p. 419). Accordingly, education holds normative implications for our conceptions of personhood. A 'good' student is one who, regardless of their social origins, attends school, studies, improves academically, obtains decent grades, transitions through levels, and, ultimately, ascends the credential ladder (Lauder et al., 2006). Buried within this experience is the practice of *panopticism*¹⁰: social control operating through surveillance and visibility (Foucault, 1995). Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's nineteenth-century penal reforms, wherein towers constantly monitored prisoners who, crucially, could not view nor verify their surveillers, "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). Education-as-panopticism is crucial to governmentality from several perspectives. First, in terms of discipline, power operates through student monitoring and observation, including attendance

⁹ Original emphasis.

¹⁰ pan=all; optic=seeing.

tracking and performance reports. Disciplinary force, in turn, normalises behaviour and control, with learners encouraged to conform to established norms and rules (i.e., truth regimes) under surveillance—this begets self-regulation where students internalise disciplinary mechanisms. Indeed, self-surveillance is, perhaps, the key feature of educational panopticism, as students begin to regulate their behaviour due to their awareness of being observed (Foucault, 1995).

In doing so, panopticism reinforces hierarchy, with disciplinary agents, including school administrators and faculty, holding the power to surveil and discipline learners. From a strictly NPM standpoint, panopticism is also associated with drives for efficiency and productivity. Schools may use surveillance and monitoring to ensure that resources are utilised effectively, students meet academic standards, and educational goals are achieved. Consolidating the above within governmentality, by normalising social pressures and audited regulation (examinations, attendance records, performance reports, etc.), schools function as panopticons, disciplining and imposing responsabilisation among those who fall under its gaze. Enforced through shame, students are *aware* of their surveillance, which, in keeping with neoliberalism's demand for self-governance, urges them to *care for the self*—to self-assess, self-regulate, and normalise their behaviours to conform to institutional truth regimes. In doing so, they are equipped with the cognitive and ethical tools demanded by the labour market. We must *also* recognise, however, that in Foucauldian (2003) terms, external attempts to “structure the (possible) actions of others” stimulate an internal “management of possibilities” (p. 138). Thus, disciplinary power is invariably exercised over active subjects capable of reacting to and *resisting* attempts to regulate their conduct (McKee, 2009). Hence, Foucault (2003) challenges the causal, mechanistic vision of agency-versus-structure found in hegemonic readings of neoliberalism; certainly, “if freedom is not to be defined as the absence of constraint, but as a rather diverse array of invented technologies ... such a binary is meaningless” (Rose et al., 2006, p. 100).

Connecting Neoliberal Governmentality to the Present Research Context

By tracing the historical and philosophical basis of neoliberalism, its technologies and rationalities of governance, influence on entrepreneurial subjectivity, and mobilisation through panopticism, this chapter has laid the foundation for the ‘golden thread’ woven throughout this thesis: *neoliberal biographical projects*. In essence, Japanese education tethers to the “vast ensemble of experiences, practices and relations that characterise the processes of governmental self formation” (Kelly, 2006, p. 18). State technologies and rationalities mould entrepreneurial projects, instilling a duty for self-care. An ethical, lifelong, do-it-yourself project conducted on the body, mind, and soul as one reconciles truth regimes (Han, 2017; Kelly, 2006, 2017). Through rational enterprise, biographical transition points (*youth*→*adolescence*→*adulthood*) respond to calculative technologies initiated within the economy and relocated to adjacent social domains. Returning to Wacquant (2012), however, we must *also* account for neoliberalism's innate malleability. Certainly, “there is not one big-N Neoliberalism but an indefinite number of small-n neoliberalisms born of the ongoing hybridisation of neoliberal practices and ideas with local conditions and forms” (p. 70). Wacquant (2012) implores us to follow Ong (2006), who proposes “neoliberalism not as a ‘culture’ or a ‘structure’ but as mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualized from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and

contingent relationships” (Ong, 2006, p. 13). Thus, neoliberalism must *always* be understood in relation to its surroundings.

In making this claim, Ong (2006) highlights East Asia as a fertile ground for studying governmentality owing to the region’s dynamic synthesis of global and domestic political cultures. A Foucauldian lens allows us to trace transmitted *and* embedded phenomena, practices, and identities that are, at times, contradictory and disjunctive (Fairclough, 1992). By exploring Japanese biographical projects, I hope to understand the foundations of entrepreneurial selfhood locally. Indeed, it may be argued that Japan is an exemplar setting for this undertaking, given its adherence to responsabilisation, emphasis on duty and culpability (Fu, 2016), and commitment to the Confucian axiom of fostering “talent and virtue as the key argument for a hierarchical meritocracy” (Ying, 2020, p. 1017). Recently, the ascendancy of Japanese neoliberalism, subsumed under the pretence of globalism, has been subjected to fierce scholarly critique (i.e., Ogawa, 2013; Okura Gagné, 2020; Kubota & Takeda, 2020; Yamane et al., 2020). Nevertheless, while this body of work draws our gaze toward neoliberal practices locally, there remains a gap in the available literature: *empirical accounts of Japanese governmentality*.

Drawing on a Foucauldian lens, Okura Gagné (2020) traced the social impact of Japanese corporate reform on self-management skills, noting that neoliberal subjectivities “are always contingent upon the multiscale historical and cultural contexts of work, responsibility, and risk” (p. 455). Yamane et al. (2020), meanwhile, elicited American and Japanese large-scale survey data to conclude that the core features of *homo oeconomicus* link to favourable perceptions of human performance. Finally, Ogawa (2013) examined Japanese lifelong learning policies and practices, demonstrating “Japan’s inflections of neoliberal governmentality with the new distribution of responsibility between the state and the individuals through the construction of new knowledge” (p. 132). Given the implicit societal debt borne by the entrepreneur-as-project, whereby they engage “reflexively, continuously, endlessly, *for the term of [their] natural life*¹¹” (Kelly, 2006, p. 18), Ogawa’s (2013) piece perhaps best reflects the intentions of my inquiry. Nevertheless, as a conceptual study, it fails to provide a phenomenological basis for investigation. This is not to say that the analyses detailed here are without merit. Instead, they highlight the pronounced gap in current literature that I seek to fill. Taking HE as its setting, this study places itself at the nexus of Japan’s educational (social adolescence) and vocational (social adulthood) transition to understand how Japan’s *gakureki shakai* prepares learners as ‘functional’ neoliberal subjects. To *truly* comprehend neoliberal governmentality’s impact on these cultural rites of passage, however, I must delve further into *what it is to be Japanese*.

Japanese Personhood

Duty, Shame, and the Struggle to Achieve “Full” Adulthood

Adopting a social-anthropological stance, personhood emphasises self-identification, particularly within a broader social field (Appell-Warren, 2014). Thus, the phenomenon remains innately heterogeneous, consolidating the rich tapestry of societal, physiological, and psychological factors deemed significant to a given culture. While some Western societies may emphasise ego-centric

¹¹ Original emphasis.

selfhood, the Confucian axioms upholding East Asian cultures extol socio-centric harmony (Kusserow, 1999; Wang, 2009; Zhang et al., 2005). Of course, this is not to say one should view East-West culture as a strict binary. Fu (2016), for instance, describes Japanese personhood as falling between these seemingly diametric positions, embracing “a complementary relationship between self and social roles” (p. 557). Transitions from adolescence to working life necessitate not only labour-derived contributions to society (Roberson, 1995) but proficiency in *kejime* (‘differentiation’ or ‘distinction’): the basic ability to comply with rules, appreciate ‘right’ from ‘wrong’, and accept responsibility for non-compliance. The correlation between this core feature of Japanese culture and neoliberal governmentality is clear. Indeed, with a Foucauldian reading of discipline in view, *kejime* predicates itself upon a fluid and intricate balance between an ‘authentic’ self and a compliant ‘outer’ persona, stipulating “how one should allocate self and roles separately and properly in different contexts, dimensions and stages of life” (Fu, 2016, p. 557).

Returning to the anthropological understanding of personhood, Appell-Warren (2014) describes cultural rituals, markers, and rites of passage as regulating one’s maturation into social roles. Thus, “personhood not only includes the external markers decided upon by a culture but includes aspects of the internal, i.e., how the individual experiences his or her personhood” (Appell-Warren, 2014, p. 1). Japan is no exception, with a culturally embedded distinction between physical and social maturation encompassing *shōnen/shōjo*¹² (youth), *seinen* (social adolescence), and *shakaijin* (social adulthood). *Shōnen/shōjo* marks childhood, pubescence, and physical adolescence, encompassing State-mandated education (ages 7–18). *Seinen*, meanwhile, signifies social adolescence, including tertiary education (usually ages 18–22+). Crucial here is the differentiation between physical and social adulthood, for while *seinen* status may extend to one’s late 20s, one may only identify as a ‘full’ contributor to society upon entering the labour market. Thus, *shakaijin* represents the critical transition point in Japanese culture (Nagasue, 2020; Roberson, 1995). As with *kejime*, *shakaijin* is a capricious and fluid phenomenon that, while superficially homogenous, varies among demographics. For women, patriarchal Confucian norms necessitate a dutiful “household belonging” and obligatory “motherhood” (Cook, 2016; Fu, 2016). Males from less-privileged socio-economic backgrounds, meanwhile, typically transition to the blue-collar labour market years before their middle-class counterparts, “caught up in the national obsession with university education” (Roberson, 1995, p. 309).

Transitions between *seinen* and *shakaijin* reveal contact points for stratification via one’s capacity to harmonise with societal obligations. When viewed within the context of *kejime*, we also understand the significance of governmentality-mediated social adulthood to the ‘spirit’. Johnson (1995), for instance, notes the importance of self-discipline to the “conscious part of idealized self-presentation” (p. 246). Here, a subject’s societal ‘worth’ may be demonstrated by their expenditure of effort, overcoming hardships, and physical and mental endurance. Thus, Johnson (1995) describes productivity as an immutable quality of Japanese identification, one that drives role perfectionism as an ego ideal and motivation to “improve skills, particularly those connected to work activity” (p. 246). Turner (1991), too, details the Japanese “spirit of productivity”, whereby *shakaijin* view “happiness as something that comes with the strong spirit

¹² Note: *shōnen* is the Japanese term for a male youth, while *shōjo* is the equivalent female term.

cultivated through achievement at work” (pp. 90-92). Cook (2016), meanwhile, notes the importance of “being capable, having common sense, following social rules, [and] working responsibly for the good of the nation” (p. 323). Of course, this all serves to re-emphasise the accord between the Japanese and neoliberal subjectivities and how, through the interlaced technologies of self-esteem, normalisation, and responsabilisation, Japan’s enterprise society shames subjects into conformity. Suppose one fails to meet the terms of this transmissible social contract. In that case, there is an accompanying expectation that they take the initiative, correct course, and make “a contribution for the sake of society” (Roberson, 1995, p. 307).

The suggestion that alienation presents an overwhelming social stigma within Japanese culture is somewhat of a truism. Dore and Sako (1998) note the difficulties faced by non-conforming youths when not “spiritually integrated into the group” (p. 8), highlighting the criticality of *harmony (wa)*¹³ to social interactions. Imported during Confucianism’s introduction to Japan in the third century, *wa* emerged as a social and ethical philosophy during the Edo Period (Craig, 1998). Specifically, *wa*, as part of the broader Confucian ideology, emphasises “that things and persons should fall into proper places and order so that they can relate to each other in a supportive and harmonious manner” (Zhang et al., 2005, p. 109). Again, the implications here for shame and stratification are manifest. Nevertheless, per its melioristic emphasis on hierarchical meritocracy, Confucianism *allows* for upward social mobility (Ying, 2020), even if this practice is rarely, if ever, egalitarian (Nakanishi, 2019; Smith, 2021). Notwithstanding the veracity of Confucianism’s dedication to universalised merit-based reward, this belief rationalises Japan’s prestige-graded education system, with performance in “meritocratic entrance examinations for senior high schools and universities” (Fujita, 2000, p. 43) holding implications for a learner’s vocational destination. However, as will soon be discussed, entrance exams are not *always* necessary for placement in prestigious HEIs.

Regardless, it has long been claimed that Japan is the prototypical *gakureki-shakai*, or ‘credential society’. In positioning itself as an outcome-focused “degreeocracy” (Okada, 2001, p. 303), Japanese education pays little attention to the veiled inequities, forfeited childhoods, and psychological burdens driving its allegedly egalitarian filtering process (Okada, 2013). The reality of Japan’s hyper-competitive, high-pressure testing culture, or *shiken jigoku* (‘exam hell’), in which youths battle to secure placement at one of Japan’s brand-name universities, is stark. Ito (2021) reports 107 cases of exam-related suicide among HS seniors in 2020 alone. This casts further doubt on *homo oeconomicus*’ dehistoricised ‘rational optimiser’ while also emphasising the significance of melioristic, duty-bound credentialism to Japanese subjectivity. In the meritocratic ‘degreeocracy’, the entrepreneurial project is the master of its destiny; it needs only the requisite amount of time and effort to secure placement at a prestigious university and *lifelong* “choice employment beyond” (Ross, 2008, p. 7). Returning briefly to Japanese social harmony, wherein “persons should fall into proper places and order” (Zhang et al., 2005, p. 109), the school-to-work transition is critical. Indeed, the emotional cost associated with failure is, at times, severe; a recent study recounting the experiences of unsuccessful job applicants observed that “what he learned

¹³ So central is harmony to Japanese culture, that its kanji (和) may also be read as ‘Japanese-style’.

through job-hunting was that he was a *weak person, and not needed by society*¹⁴” (Kawanishi, 2020). Thus, in responsabilising the success or failure of school-to-work transitions as an issue of self-care, self-esteem comes to be coloured in neoliberal terms.

In sum, it is argued that Japan’s enterprise society presents a model example for investigating neoliberal subjectivity. Returning to the claim that entrepreneurial selfhood constitutes “an institutionalised biography (Childhood—Youth—Adulthood)” (Kelly, 2006, p. 18), we come to understand the degree to which Japan’s enduring (and, thus, *pre-neoliberal*) maturation points (*shōnen/shōjo—seinen—shakaijin*) present natural junctures with which to frame biographical reconstructions. As reiterated throughout, an idiographic exploration of the lived subject-as-entrepreneurial project constitutes the ‘golden thread’ woven throughout this thesis. Before pressing forth, however, I must re-clarify that the attributes traditionally associated with Japanese subjectivity—duty, perfectionism, productivity, social harmony, credentialism, and *kejime*-derived responsabilisation—are not, in and of themselves, destructive nor unwelcome. Certainly, the nation’s rapid post-WWII modernisation and economic growth are testimony to their potential. However, embodying these capacities through unyielding competition and a narrowly imagined “performance of exchange relations” (Kelly, 2006, p. 29) upholds a Darwinist strong-weak binary. Through this anxiety-engendering truth (Karademir, 2013), youths compete to approximate the ‘inevitable’: responsabilisation.

The Structures of Neoliberal Governmentality in Japanese Education

Prologue

Having ‘built my case’ by tracing neoliberalism’s historical development, identifying it as governmentality enforced through panopticism, and connecting its technologies to enduring features of Japanese personhood, I now apply this context to Japanese education and, in doing so, set the stage for interpreting how neoliberal logic embeds in local reform and institutional practice. Hashimoto (2014) observes that Japanese neoliberal discourse incorporates a variety of ideological, political, and sociological agendas. Indeed, since its realisation at the turn of the twenty-first century (Mukawa, 2009, p. 414), Japanese marketisation has provided fertile ground for scholarly debate, particularly within the scope of educational policy (i.e., Okura Gagné, 2020; Kubota & Takeda, 2020; Smith & Samuell, 2024; Yamane et al., 2020). Horiguchi et al. (2015), Mizuno (2008), and Nowlan (2019) describe Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) as orientated toward industrial demands, often rationalised through “neoliberal discourses [which] emphasize that it is the responsibility of the individual to acquire the information and skills, including communication or language ability, that are considered important for the new knowledge economy” (Horiguchi et al., 2015, p. 3). In more explicitly Foucauldian terms, the entrepreneurial self.

Certainly, a broad consensus between the State and its educational and vocational sectors over the school-to-work transition exists, with Uehara (2016) noting the expectation that higher education institutions (HEIs) “achieve a rapid transformation of their students from ‘children’ who lack essential social know-how into functional ‘grown-ups’”. In this sense, Japanese universities

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

serve to socialise as much as they do to credentialise. Pushes for the neoliberalisation of Japanese education began during the 1980s, when the nation was at the zenith of its economic and industrial might (Muta, 2006; Smith, 2021). Here, MEXT enacted autonomy reform, wherein “the allocation of public funding for research was made more competitive, and funding from corporations and other entities was actively encouraged” (Amano, 2014). This followed extensive NPM measures subsumed under the pretence of “enhancement, diversification, and individualism” (Itoh, 2002, p. 22), which allowed Japanese HEIs to swell in number from 507 in 1990 to 782 in 2013 (Amano, 2014). As noted by Muta (2006), deregulation breeds competition among colleges and prospective learners vying for placement at brand-name HEIs. Before scrutinising HE, however, I will first explore the impact of neoliberal reform on *shōnen/shōjo*.

Transition Point 1: Shōnen/Shōjo, High-Stakes Schooling, & the Lure of Shadow Education

Following Horiguchi et al. (2015), neoliberalism redefined Japanese education “as a market-driven private commodity” (p. 3). Through enticing policy-speak, *kosei* (‘individuality’), *gurōbaruka* (‘globalisation’), and *yutori-kyōiku* (‘relaxed’ or ‘hands-off education’), a concurrent shift in authority from the State to the business sector prompted a displacement of the Keynesian model that drove much of the nation’s post-war boom (Horiguchi et al., 2015). Implemented as part of sweeping structural reform in 2002, *yutori-kyōiku* was, in part, a reaction to the extreme nature of Japan’s examination culture, heralding an attempt to withdraw from the rote method in favour of initiative-building pedagogy (Tsuneyoshi, 2004) and choice in student placement and intra-school transitions (Smith, 2021). Connections between neoliberalism and policy rationalities ‘initiative’, ‘individuality’, ‘global’, and ‘hands-off’ are manifest; more intriguing are the decentralisation and deregulation reforms that accompanied *yutori-kyōiku*’s arrival. Bjork (2015) notes that the initiative was driven by business leaders in influential positions in the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Concerned that MEXT failed to provide the human capital necessary for expansion in global markets, bureaucrats “endorsed revisions to the education system that followed the logic of neoliberalism and New Public Management” (Bjork, 2015, p. 26).

Nitta (2008), too, describes MEXT reform as applying “a New Public Management (NPM) approach championed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development” (p. 23). Specifically, this practice may be interpreted as neoliberal governmentality emphasising the ‘3 Ms’: *management*, *measurement of performance*, and *market or quasi-marketisation* (Ferlie, 2010). Using a ‘loose-tight’ logic, MEXT encourages hands-off regulation alongside quantitative accountability, driving schools to implement outcome-focused strategies. However, competitive policies aimed at increasing efficiency risk obfuscating the social and historical situatedness of learners and, for that matter, institutions, viewing them through a facile good-bad logic. In the latter case, underperforming schools face cuts in funding (Nitta, 2008), reinforcing a sink-or-swim competitive ecology that further strengthens prestigious institutions. In Japan’s decentralised NPM field, it is only rational that schools closely aligned with MEXT goals receive the lion’s share of governmental subsidies. Therefore, Japanese schools should not be considered passive or helpless receivers of neoliberal machinations but as active and *responsibilised agents* of its diffusion. Indeed, considering *yutori-kyōiku* sought to reshape education to the realities of contemporary

Japanese society, including the demands of its industrial sector (Bjork, 2015), perhaps no initiative was more successful than 2003's School District Free System (SDFS).

Decentralisation reform seeking competitive marketisation and the responsabilisation of educational outcomes as parental choice, SDFS relaxed Japan's previously stringent school catchment regulations, allowing school corporations to dominate the educational landscape. Here, MEXT authorised private schools to open their doors to learners beyond previous boundaries, with “the school's ranking on standardized tests within that district” (Wada & Burnett, 2011, p. 10) emerging as a key selection criterion for households. This, in turn, drove schools to align with neoliberal rationalities, aiding student progression by forging direct and indirect links with prestigious universities as ‘escalator’ and ‘recommendation’ schools, respectively. These terms will be expanded upon shortly; for now, one should understand that the decentralisation of Japan's education system saw a proliferation of educational corporations and private academies that, among other policies, offer non-test-taking transitions between umbrella schools, with Kubota (2011) noting a growth rate of “18 in 2001 to 293 in 2008” (p. 108). Thus, as part of an NPM agenda, SDFS exposed Japan's formal education system to emerging market forces. While *shōnen/shōjo* were once guaranteed placement at highly-ranked schools within their respective catchment areas, those wishing to attend prestigious elementary or junior high schools (JHS) must now battle for competitive placement (NIER, 2017). The risk, of course, is that the kinship-based reciprocity crucial to a child's long-term development (Sakya et al., 2015) warps into *homo oeconomicus*' narrow, self-interested utility. In this situation, the child's peers are friends *and* rivals. Thus, we may broadly view Japan's competitive school culture as the starting point for entrepreneurial personhood, wherein an ostensibly meritocratic education system conditions young learners as “self-interested subjects” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314).

Perhaps most indicative of NPM is the *esukareitā gakkō* system, wherein students attending private primary, junior high, and high schools are, in effect, guaranteed vertical progress without participating in selective entrance examinations (Datta, 1992; Green, 2000; NIER, 2017)—hence, an *escalator*. Indeed, while uncommon, it is feasible that a student advances from kindergarten to post-doctoral study at schools that fall under the same corporate umbrella. Keio University, one of the nation's most prestigious colleges, includes two primary and seven secondary schools, as well as an extensive study abroad (SA) network, as part of its “affiliated schools” (Keio, 2024). Keio's (2024) claims that “students are encouraged to *take initiative*¹⁵ in all aspects of school life and are offered a multitude of opportunities to discover and *realize their individual potential*” naturally aligns with NPM's enterprise ontology. Regardless, one thing remains clear—the earlier a student embarks on the ‘escalator’ and, in turn, avoids hyper-competitive entrance examinations, the higher their chances of entering ‘élite’ HE. As noted by Green (2000, p. 431), “parents are choosing [escalator schools] both because they are seen to give privileged access to good universities and also because they are believed to relieve children of some of the pressures associated with examination competition”. This is not to say that exams can be circumvented entirely; NIER (2017) notes that prospective learners must make considerable efforts to secure placement at *esukareitā gakkō*, depending on the prestige of the terminal institution.

¹⁵ Emphasis added throughout.

While an ‘escalator’ association with a prestigious college benefits a feeder institution’s market positioning and student enrolment, it is not the only strategy available to schools. Contrary to ‘escalator’ transitions, the *suisen* recommendation system allows successful students from *non*-affiliated schools (i.e., not part of the same corporate entity) to enrol in universities without taking entrance exams. Thus, as part of NPM’s ‘invisible hand’, recommendation networks present compelling selling points for schools to attract learners. Indeed, Nakamura (2011) estimates the number of *suisen* transitions to be 35.4% in 2010; however, when accounting for private schools in isolation, this figure rises to 65.1% (Matsuoka, 2013; Nakamura, 2011). Following NPM’s drive for accountability, HS are responsible for assessing and recommending students based on performance measurement indicators, including academics, extracurricular activities, and personal qualities. This targeted approach, in theory, reduces the administrative burden on colleges compared to handling a large volume of tests, thereby increasing efficiency. From a Foucauldian perspective, *suisen* reveal contact points with governmentality as schools discipline students through surveillance (monitoring academic performance and activities), normalisation (establishing norms of achievement and behaviour), and assessment (evaluating suitability for recommendation). Indeed, through its emphasis on accountability and performance measurement, *suisen*’s disciplinary framework normalises values and attributes desirable for HE *and* NPM.

Given recommendations and, more explicitly, ‘escalator’ transitions are typically reserved for students from high-income households (Nakamura, 2011; Matsuoka, 2013), traditional entrance exams also play a significant role in academic filtering. Indeed, during ‘exam hell’, school placement tests assess academic skills, knowledge, and problem-solving abilities, with the *hensachi* (‘deviation value’) system used to rank students based on their exam scores. A higher *hensachi* indicates higher academic ability and, thus, a higher chance of placement in a top-tier, ‘high *hensachi*’ school or university. This system allows schools to classify learners and vice-versa. As noted by Guillaume (2016, p. 7), institutional *hensachi* rankings remain unofficial yet easily accessible, with prospective students typically “adjust[ing] their aspirations depending on their own personal *hensachi* and previously admitted students’ average *hensachi* at a specific university or faculty”. Given that *hensachi* is often translated as ‘deviation value’, Jones (2019, p. 28) notes that a “*hensachi* rank of 50 thus means that the student or school can be considered at the middle nationwide, while a score one standard deviation over the mean would be 60”, with Newfields (2006) reporting 94.5% of all university departments falling between the 30-70 range. Nakamura (2011) and Matsuoka (2013) note that private university departments with a *hensachi* of 65-69 remain among the most competitive, falling within the top 6.6-2.8% nationwide. *Hensachi*-based competition, in turn, filters down to the learners vying for placement. Here, we may observe Japanese NPM at work. Through a ‘loose-tight’ logic of management, measurement, and quasi-marketisation (Ferlie, 2010), households are guided to choose the institution and *transition* type that best suits their consumer profiles.

From a Foucauldian perspective, however, differentiated transitions reinforce power structures, perpetuating inequalities by favouring learners with specific backgrounds, experiences, or privileges, and excluding others who may be equally capable but lack the same opportunities. Nonetheless, while NPM-derived formal education scaffolds neoliberal self-formation, the nation’s unregulated, non-formal education network, too, conditions enterprise. So pervasive is

juku, Japan's 'shadow' cram school network, that the Yano Research Institute (2016) estimated supplementary education expenditure to be ¥2.5 trillion (approximately US\$20.3 billion) in 2015 alone. With these figures in view, the presumed necessity of shadow education highlights a precarious gap between secondary schooling and the realities of Japan's 'exam hell'. Considering the criticality of *hensachi* to Japan's prestige-graded education system, households invest in *juku* to ease graded transitions (Samuell, 2024a; Smith, 2024). Thus, it is crucial to recognise that while 'hands-off education' sought to distance Japanese education from intense exam culture (Bjork, 2015; Tsuneyoshi, 2004), the liberalisation of Japanese formal education, in actuality, increased competition, driving families towards shadow education in their attempts to carve out an advantage. When observing Figure 2, a university placement poster found in the window of a *juku*, one may understand the importance of *hensachi* and the relationship between shadow education and university transitions for non-recommendation and 'escalator' students. While the top (pink) section details student *hensachi* scores and placement in top-tier national universities, the bottom (green) advertises student *hensachi* improvement and placement in prestigious private HEIs.

In this regard, *juku* aim to increase a student's academic marketability, "providing a numerical value of a student's achievement in mock entrance examinations, approximating real exams as closely as possible, to derive these students' odds at succeeding on actual university entrance examinations" (Guillaume, 2016, p. 7). Returning to Figure 2, the (pink) student scoring 70.9 gained admittance to Kyoto University's Faculty of Engineering, a department recording a *hensachi* of 67 in 2024 (University Deviation Ranking 2024, 2024a). Meanwhile, the (green) student recorded an increase of 62.3 from an initial 36.3 and will attend Kansai University Faculty of Law, a department with a *hensachi* of 59 (University Deviation Ranking 2024, 2024b). These figures, in turn, lend credence to Goodman and Oka's (2018, p. 583) claims that "most students would apply for institutions a bit below, exactly at, and a bit above their *hensachi* in order to maximise and insure their chances". More pointedly, *juku* provide "a lucrative market based on the insecurity of families and teachers; the greater the insecurity, the more practice tests they would need to take and hence the greater the income for the companies" (Goodman & Oka, 2018, p. 583). By regulating university transitions, *hensachi* perpetuates competitive mindsets where students are constantly compared and ranked on quantifiable academic performance. Monitored surveillance begets normalisation, wherein standards of academic excellence are established (Foucault, 1995).

Figure 2. The *hensachi* scores and university placements of *juku* students (redacted).



Benesse's (2017) survey on shadow education activities depicts a grade-on-grade increase from 27.6% for first-year elementary students to 58% for JHS seniors. As "part of a *social fabric*¹⁶ that has stressed diligence in learning" (Bray & Lykins, 2012, p. 38), decisions to enrol in *juku* are entrenched within doxic societal anxiety. A MEXT (2008) survey of 40,883 parents noted insecurities "over only sending their children to State schools" (66.5%) and "over a society that places great emphasis on academic credentials" (59.9%) as factors driving *juku* investment. Consequently, we may view *juku* as a manifestation of responsabilisation—Japan's culturally-embedded commitment to *kejime* (again, the fundamental differentiation between 'right' and 'wrong') and *gakureki* ('credentialism') fuse with an unregulated shadow education system to discipline educational outcomes as direct consequences of individual investment. In this instance, a responsible parent invests in *juku* to facilitate transitions to the highest-ranked school available to their child (Smith, 2024). In doing so, the entrepreneurial project begins afresh; governmentality's hold on Japanese society is strengthened and reproduced. Returning to Ong's (2006) reading of neoliberalism "as mobile calculative techniques of governing" (p. 13), it is this 'social fabric' that, in part, positions Japan as an exemplar setting for governmentality analysis. Japan's NPM-derived formal education and unregulated *juku* systems thrive not through hegemonic dominance but enduring cultural markers predating neoliberalism.

Thus, Entrich (2015) implores researchers to "acknowledge the influence of students' own choices on the decision for shadow education" (Entrich, 2015, p. 212). While it is unreasonable to expect seven-year-olds to act as rational decision-makers, the same cannot be argued for their teenage counterparts. Research by LeTendre (1996) found that 95% of Japanese JHS seniors believed they alone were responsible for their educational choices, with 63.5% of all surveyed *shōnen/shōjo* agreeing with the statement: "even if my parents are against it, I'll go to the school I want to go to" (p. 206). In his research on *juku* enrolment patterns, Entrich (2015) reports that while parents influence 'rational choices' for shadow education, student agency in decision-making increases over time. By the time *shōnen/shōjo* transition to HS, "students' aspirations become critical for the decision" (Entrich, 2018, p. 134). Echoing the insecurities reported by MEXT (2008), Shintani (2013) describes uncertainty amongst learners over a perceived lack of support from State education, especially amongst those fighting "for admission into the more competitive and prestigious junior high and high schools" (p. 348). These findings highlight youths as agentive and calculative decision-makers, with *juku* increasing the probability of attending a highly-ranked JHS or HS. Here, the entrepreneurial project conducts itself freely and rationally (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010), lending further credence to this study's aim of better understanding how neoliberal governance in education reinterprets subjects as entrepreneurial projects.

Transition Point 2: Seinen, Cosmopolitanism, & 'Élite' Higher Education

Following a pivot toward NPM, Japanese HE adopted a 'loose-tight' competitive logic aimed at reducing the scope of government (Nitta, 2008). In 2004, Japan's 83 national universities converted into corporations, granting them greater autonomy through a locus of result-orientated culpability (Yamamoto, 2004). In addition, MEXT enforced 1% annual cuts to operational support funds alongside a 3% decrease in grants (Colpitts, 2023; Kikuchi, 2021; Wada & Burnett, 2011).

¹⁶ Emphasis added.

Viewed alongside an expansion of private colleges, we can see MEXT's intention to establish a highly-competitive, sink-or-swim HE network. Indeed, one of NPM's defining logics is efficiency through quasi-marketisation, wherein public and private sectors are evaluated against one another via quantifiable outcomes. As noted by Kikuchi (2021), however, while privatisation reforms were extensive, they remain 'partial' considering MEXT "has continued to exert substantial influence over the overall national university system despite the delegation of authority for university operations" (p. 4). Audit culture plays a role here, including competitive research funding and grants for placing highly in university league tables. However, direct alignment with MEXT policy has proven to be the most lucrative strategy. Wada and Burnett (2011) describe "an increased focus on rewards in the form of grants to highly reformed university[ies] and a cutting of grants to universities who have not yet adopted such structural change" (p. 11).

But what is MEXT demanding? Considering the OECD's (2006) claim that "Japanese tertiary education policies have been significantly affected by the developed internal labor market within corporations" (p. 25), it is hardly surprising that HE policies maintain an economic rationale (Hammond, 2016). Certainly, Japan emphasises internationalisation reform, given its justification of globally-conscious human capital as requisite to economic growth (Smith & Samuell, 2024). Former MEXT head Shimomura Hakubun's (2013) calls for "Japan to ensure that its system of higher education, particularly through the internationalisation of its universities, fosters highly capable people with a global perspective who can play active roles in many fields" (p. B1), for instance, predate Tobitate's (2021) concern that 70% of Japanese corporations experience difficulties securing and developing talent for international postings. Given that communicative skills are paradigmatic to transcultural trade, politics, science, and academia (Dubin, 2023; Samuell, 2024b; Smith, 2022b), English is a major policy concern for Japanese HE. At this point, it should be noted that English education is not this study's main focus—English is but *one* governmental rationality. So central is the language to globalisation, however, that it interweaves in the normalisation of "what is and what is not regarded as acceptable and valuable" (Zotzmann, 2013, p. 253). Indeed, MEXT's (2003) ambition to nurture "future leaders ... with English abilities" anchors to Japan's quasi-nationalistic predilection for duty-bound citizenship:

With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation. (MEXT, 2003)

Linked to a Social Darwinist rhetoric "of national power and aggressiveness for survival" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 343), MEXT's (2003) *Action Plan for 2003* provides the basis for the globalisation reform that would follow (Smith, 2021). This includes *Global 30* (2008-2014), the *Re-inventing Japan Project* (2011-present), the *Go Global Japan Project* (2012-2016), and the recent *Top Global University Project* (2014-2024) that this project's host institution claimed membership of.

While a detailed analysis of each initiative falls outside the scope of this inquiry, Global 30 sought to “strengthen Japan’s global competitiveness¹⁷”, enhancing intercultural skills locally through inbound study abroad (SA) at 30 leading HEIs (MEXT, 2009). The Re-inventing Japan Project emphasises: “two-way student mobility and concern for the need of global human resources” and “the importance of increasing domestic students’ proficiency in English in order to study abroad” (Rose & McKinley, 2018, pp. 118-119). The four-year Go Global initiative was similarly focused, albeit with a more overtly neoliberal rationale, including “contributing to the development of ‘*economic society*’¹⁸ ... strengthen[ing] students’ *global adaptiveness* ... [and] ... fostering people capable of *aggressively challenging* global issues and playing *active roles* on the global stage” (JSPS, 2014). Finally, and most fittingly to this study, the Top Global University Project (TGUP) aims to enhance “educational systems to help students develop the ability to act globally” (Matsutani, 2018). Given my research takes place at a TGUP college, this reform, more than any other, requires clarification.

A ten-year strategy intended to develop globalised human capital within 37 “world-class and innovative universities” (MEXT, 2014), TGUP houses Japan’s best and brightest *seinen*, those positioned to “walk into positions of global leadership” (Maruko, 2014). As demonstrated in Table 1, the quasi-marketisation of HE ensures competitive diversity, with each TGUP institution granted freedom to enact ‘local form’ policies, given they harmonise with MEXT’s broader vision for English and global mindsets (Smith, 2022b). Given the project’s overall focus, TGUP colleges employ English assessment during student filtering, including Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores and, in light of MEXT’s decentralisation of HE, university-specific English-language entrance examinations, *suisen* interviews, and English-language essays (Nagatomo & Allen, 2019; Smith & Samuell, 2024). These measures augment the English component of the *Daigaku Nyūgaku Kyōtsū Tesuto*, the common assessment for university admissions, increasing the *seinen*’s academic burden. Thus, English, as a screening mechanism for ‘élite’ colleges, strengthens the language’s utility within the linguistic market (Samuell 2024b), normalising it as rational and ‘necessary’ for one’s entrepreneurial project. De Costa et al. (2016, 2020) extend Foucault’s heuristic, describing “the moral imperative to strategically exploit language-related resources for enhancing one’s worth” (De Costa et al., 2016, p. 696) as *linguistic entrepreneurialism*. Certainly, entrance examination statistics reflect entrepreneurial practice. In 2014, the first year of TGUP, approximately 98% of applicants nationwide participated in the English section of the *Sentā Shiken*, the predecessor to the *Daigaku Nyūgaku Kyōtsū Tesuto*. For reference, 94.6% took the Japanese-language equivalent (Entrich, 2018, p. 38).

¹⁷ Author’s translation.

¹⁸ Emphasis added throughout.

Table 1. Selection of TGUP HEI internal policy. *Note.* Taken from internal “project summaries” found on the MEXT (2021) *initiatives of universities selected for the project website.*

TGUP HEI	“English Education” Discourse	“Global Human Capital” Discourse
International Christian University	Targeting “acquisition of Japanese, English, and one other language”, “increasing number of classes taught in English”, and “increase percentage of senior theses written in English” by 2023.	“Creating responsible global citizens through a global liberal arts education.” “Nurture well-rounded citizens equipped with the language skills needed for global dialogue.”
Kanazawa University	Targeting “50% of undergraduate courses offered in English” and “reforms of English Classes, rich support from the English learning advisor in order to strengthen English ability” by 2030.	“Developing human resources to lead the global society and establishing the Kanazawa University brand by thorough internationalization.”
Kyoto Institute of Technology	“We are implementing an English training program and aim to have 50% of undergraduate students and 80% of graduate students achieving TOEIC® scores of 730 or more.”	“Producing globally active human resources.” “Training sophisticated engineers (Tech Leaders) who can lead and contribute to the globalization of the industrial infrastructure in all countries.”
Nara Institute of Science and Technology	“As English communication skills are essential for realizing a global campus, TOEIC scores are used to assess and monitor the learning progress.” “Doctoral students must be capable to disseminate their research findings globally using English.”	“Fostering of globally competent professionals who will lead tomorrow’s science and technology.” “Developing globally-competent, professionally-skilled graduates.”
Rikkyo University	“Establish ... English-medium 4-year undergraduate degree program.” “Reform the entrance examination system to take into account results of standardized English tests by external providers.”	“Rooted in its liberal arts tradition, Rikkyo offers original and innovative leadership education which aims to produce a new type of global leader that can think and act independently while engaging with cultural diversity around the world.”
Sophia University	“Make trans-disciplinary global education courses possible in English but also help develop into a pioneering program that will foster individuals who can contribute to the creation of harmonious multicultural societies.”	“Pioneering global education transcending the framework of nationality to develop human resources that can boldly take on global issues.” “Make Sophia University a “connecting hub” that serves as a base for circulating the global human resources active in the world today.”
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies	Targeting “four times number of students attaining TOEIC® 800 points or more” by 2023.	“Developing multi-lingual globally minded students.”

For now, consider Table 1 alongside Amano and Poole’s (2005) claim that Japanese HEIs “are not merely standing by passively” (p. 688). As with primary and secondary schools, Japanese universities (including non-TGUP institutions) should be considered active and responsabilised agents of governmentality. MEXT (2014) data indicates that 60% of applications for TGUP funding—¥200-500 million (approximately US \$1.9-4.8 million) annually (Smith, 2021, p. 17)—were unsuccessful. The risk is that “a clear divide will emerge between those that are on the list and those that are not” (Maruko, 2014). Here, TGUP exerts a ‘trickle-down’ effect throughout HE, prompting the establishment of internationally-focused universities seeking to ‘go global’. Doerr et al. (2020) describe a broad trend in English-taught degree programmes and an emphasis on recruiting non-Japanese students and faculty to “import diversity” (pp. 124-125). This follows earlier attempts by smaller universities to market themselves as internationalised (perhaps more accurately, *Englishised*), including an explosion of bilateral SA networks and the founding of English-language liberal arts courses and innovative campuses (Amano & Poole, 2005). As with credentialism in the broader sense, not all SA experiences are equal, with sojourns in affluent Russell Group and Ivy League colleges proving particularly valuable to cosmopolitan entrepreneurial projects (Smith & Colpitts, 2022).

Drawing on Hannerz's (1990) definition of cosmopolitanism as "a state of mind" or "personal ability to make one's way into other cultures" (239), Smith and Samuella (2024) tie the concept directly to global neoliberalism. In essence, cosmopolitanism is "increasingly important in the struggle over social positions across various social fields, as they undergo globalisation" (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017, p. 54). Kubota (2016), too, ties SA-derived internationalisation to neoliberal rationalities, considering the former's impact on transnational human capital and potential to guide quotidian practices and ways of thinking (Smith et al., 2024). Indeed, SA "constructs an image of the neoliberal subject as equipped with communication skills, a global mindset, and intercultural competence and thus as competitive in global labour marketplaces" (Kubota, 2016, pp. 348-349). Essentialist-culturalist rationalisations of globalism constitute a powerful governmental technology, with MEXT (2003) positioning SA as a pathway for "trustworthy global citizens" (Fritz & Murao, 2020, p. 520) to emerge as internationalised *homo oeconomicus*.

As with *shōnen/shōjo*, we must view *seinen* as responsabilised and calculative agents who, in acknowledging cosmopolitan pathways as necessary to educational and vocational success, demonstrate a "deep grammar of aspiration" (Ball et al., 2002, p. 337). Ball et al. (2002) describe these students as *embedded choosers*: learners with the requisite backgrounds to view globalism, graduation from brand-name colleges and careers at prestigious corporations as part of a "long-standing and vividly imagined" normal biography (p. 342). Again, one may observe a conceptual link between Kelly's (2006, p. 16) "institutionalised biography (Childhood—Youth—Adulthood)" and Japanese personhood. Embedded choosers typically inherit patrimonial understandings of interculturality, the value of "the 'right' course and the 'right' institution" (Ball et al., 2002, p. 342), and, more importantly, the skills and credentials required to gain admittance to prestigious HEIs. Analysing pre-university *juku* attendance, Shintani (2013) notes a paternal belief that "school study alone is not enough to ensure success in entrance examinations" (p. 359), reflecting Ball et al.'s (2002) claim that embedded households view HE as part of an innate cultural script. Indeed, considering Japan's reliance on shadow education alongside MEXT's restriction of TGUP branding and funding to 37 of the most prestigious of its 782 HEIs, it is clear that attempts to nurture interculturality are, arguably, for embedded choosers possessing the skills necessary to pass highly-competitive screening (Smith & Samuella, 2024).

The TGUP-derived segregation of Japanese HE "cannot promote a common practice of internationalisation in Japanese universities" (Take & Shoraku, 2018, p. 49). *Seinen* demonstrating high proficiency in English are manifestly more likely to gain admittance to TGUP colleges and, in turn, SA in Anglospheric locales, benefitting from exposure to English and, ultimately, the labels attached to such sojourns, including "'global', 'international' and 'cosmopolitan'" (Kubota, 2016, p. 354). Despite MEXT's continued efforts to promote English, long-term concerns over the quality of State English education endure (Steele & Zhang, 2016), leading middle-to-high-income households to seek fee-paying options ahead of SA, including English immersion and *juku*. It suffices to say that the arguments made in the previous section hold firm here. The system creates de-historicised 'winners' and 'losers', with the "high demand for shadow education to achieve a competitive edge in the educational race" (Fülöp & Gordon Györi, 2021, p. 148) highlighting a willingness to agentively and rationally exploit *juku*. Indeed, in a recent study on shadow education

and academic competition, Fülöp and Gordon Györi (2021) note that “relatively few students expressed doubts or emphasized the negative or harmful side of cram/preparatory school attendance and competition” (p. 143). Yet, students who did report adverse outcomes described the normalisation of adolescents as “*result/winning-orientated, narrow-minded students*¹⁹” whose “*excessive competition may make friends/peers enemies*²⁰” and produce “active agents of everything that happens to them” (Fülöp & Gordon Györi, 2021, pp. 161-163). In essence, the rational entrepreneurial projects that this thesis seeks to understand.

Transition Point 3: Shakaijin, Shūkatsu, & Academic Filters

The transition from education to vocation marks a *seinen*’s maturation to ‘full’ social adulthood. For university students, this occurs via *shūkatsu* (‘job hunting activities’), the nation’s rigorous approach to graduate recruitment. Potentially a two-year process, this “critical rite of passage for college youth in Japan” (Kawanishi, 2020) remains unique to the local context. During this period, companies ranging from regional start-ups to established corporations approach third-and-fourth-year students through seminars, occasionally at HEIs but often at job fairs and career centres, guiding prospective recruits toward employment opportunities. As expected, the university’s prestige correlates directly to graded labour market outcomes, with graduates from ‘élite’ HEIs statistically more likely to secure work at a renowned company (Ono, 2007). Through *shūkatsu*, most *seinen* ensure career-long employment before graduation, with their final degree and grade point average (GPA) having little impact on job hunting (Kawanishi, 2020). Thus, a firm consensus exists between the Japanese State and its educational and industrial sectors over systematic school-to-work transitions. HEIs are presumed to facilitate the learner’s passage “from an ‘immature’ to a ‘mature’ status whereby an ideal model can be achieved” (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016, p. 24). Considering Japan’s fixation with ‘brand image’ (Amano, 1997; Smith, 2021), it is manifestly in the HEI’s best interest to facilitate *shūkatsu* as graduate employment in large corporations strengthens its stature with companies and prospective learners (Fülöp & Gordon Györi, 2021).

One should note that Japan’s prestige-graded HE system, including the prefectural league tables mediating this hierarchy, does not *necessarily* reflect the academic qualities of its universities but, in keeping with quasi-marketisation, their respective strength of ‘brand’. Conducted by Nikkei Business, a publisher and consultancy service, the annual *Brand Rankings of Japanese Universities* canvasses approximately 25,000 people nationwide, ranking each university via six categories: “first-class status²¹”, “dynamicity”, “creativity”, “global outreach”, “community contribution”, and somewhat esoterically, “elegance and sincerity” (Nikkei Business Publications, 2020). By enabling a corporate entity to arbitrate public opinion on the brand strength of its universities, the connection between MEXT and marketisation is explicit. Certainly, the terms “dynamic”, “creativity”, “global”, and “community” reflect calls from Japanese corporations for human capital (JCED, 1993, p. 285). Indeed, *Keidanren*, Japan’s principal business federation, “comprising more than 1,300 major Japanese corporations and 100 group industries” (Shibata, 2019), codified the *shūkatsu* system in 1953.

¹⁹ Original emphasis.

²⁰ Original emphasis.

²¹ Author translation throughout

Notwithstanding the supposed open status of the market, however, *Keidanren*'s monopolistic arrangement predicated on channelling Japan's best and brightest to constituent firms was to the organisation's eventual detriment: "non-*Keidanren* members, not bound by the guidelines, have been snapping up promising students before member companies have even started recruiting" (Shibata, 2019). Enterprising *seinen* demonstrate a degree of certitude and versatility that is, perhaps, an expected outcome of 'common-sense' governmental rationalities urging independent, competitive, and judicious *entrepreneurial projects*. Thus, one should not interpret biographical transitions *entirely* as top-down hegemony. Due to the strain placed on *shūkatsu* by the nation's falling birth rate, 'rational units' of human capital are certainly able and willing to evaluate prospective employers. Uehara (2016) notes, "companies choose among students, so it's only natural for students to choose among companies". As highlighted throughout this chapter, however, the 'rational choice' to reimagine oneself as a logical enterprise remains problematic as it signifies the embodiment of robust systems of neoliberal competition that may, in turn, 'trickle down' into less contentious social situations.

Considering the binary 'winners' and 'losers' conception of worth, we must also consider *seinen*, who, having failed to transition to a prestigious corporation, 'neglect' to meet the terms of this contractual implication. The dog-eat-dog nature of *shūkatsu* is well-noted. Kawanishi (2020), for instance, describes a rigid, de-humanising system that disregards recruit well-being: "from their early 20s, students must decide how they will spend their work lives. If they stumble in this once-in-a-lifetime window of opportunity, they feel they will be judged failures". Runnebaum (2016), too, observes that "attaining a good position as a regular employee at any other time of year, or any later in life, is extremely difficult", while Hamaaki et al. (2013) found a statistically significant correlation between post-graduation recruitment and long-term labour market outcomes. In this context, the harmony between one's personal and vocational worth is manifest. So prevalent is the affective toll triggered by *shūkatsu* that Japan has an expression dedicated to the disorder: *shūkatsu utsu* ('job-hunting depression'). Again, one should remember that the nation's shotgun approach to graduate recruitment was created to benefit its industrial sector, serving to gatekeep self-actualisation as *shakaijin* to the extent that discipline, differentiation, and responsabilisation internalise as hyper-competition. In essence, linking a culturally relevant rite of passage to neoliberalism allows the latter to "become commonplace inconspicuously and without coercion. The free market has become the default setting." (Costas Batlle et al., 2018, pp. 861-862).

However, evidence suggests that *shūkatsu* is largely unnecessary. Matsuda et al. (2010) posit that its rigour hinders job placement, demonstrating that reductions in anxiety and implementing problem-focused coping strategies improved overall outcomes. Toyokawa (2018), too, confirms the futility of Japan's supposedly meritocratic job-hunting process, given the presence of the *gakureki* ('credential') filter—a "crude social deception" (Kawanishi, 2020) used by companies to screen potential applicants. The *gakureki filter* represents a taken-for-granted yet largely unspoken feature of Japan's 'degreeocracy' (Okada, 2001). Here, recruits are assessed not on their abilities, GPAs, majors, or degree paths but on the prestige ranking of their respective HEIs, making much of the *shūkatsu* process redundant. As noted by Kawanishi (2020), this is particularly worrying, given Japan's cultural emphasis on group cohesion, harmony, and *kejime*. For, if normalised hiring practices operate through covert yet presumed rules, *seinen* "are expected

to understand and accept this double standard in many areas of life, which is subtle at times, explicit at others. Not being able wisely to distinguish can be considered a sign of social immaturity.” More worrying is the ‘trickle-down’ effect of *shūkatsu* on the function and quality of HE. As stated, there is an expectation that HEIs provide job-hunting activities, allowing learners to miss classes in the event of conflicting schedules. Yano (2013), meanwhile, reports business personnel as openly declaring that “knowledge from school is no use to companies. We don’t have any expectations concerning specialist knowledge from schools. What companies want is individuality, creativity and vitality, not knowledge” (p. 68).

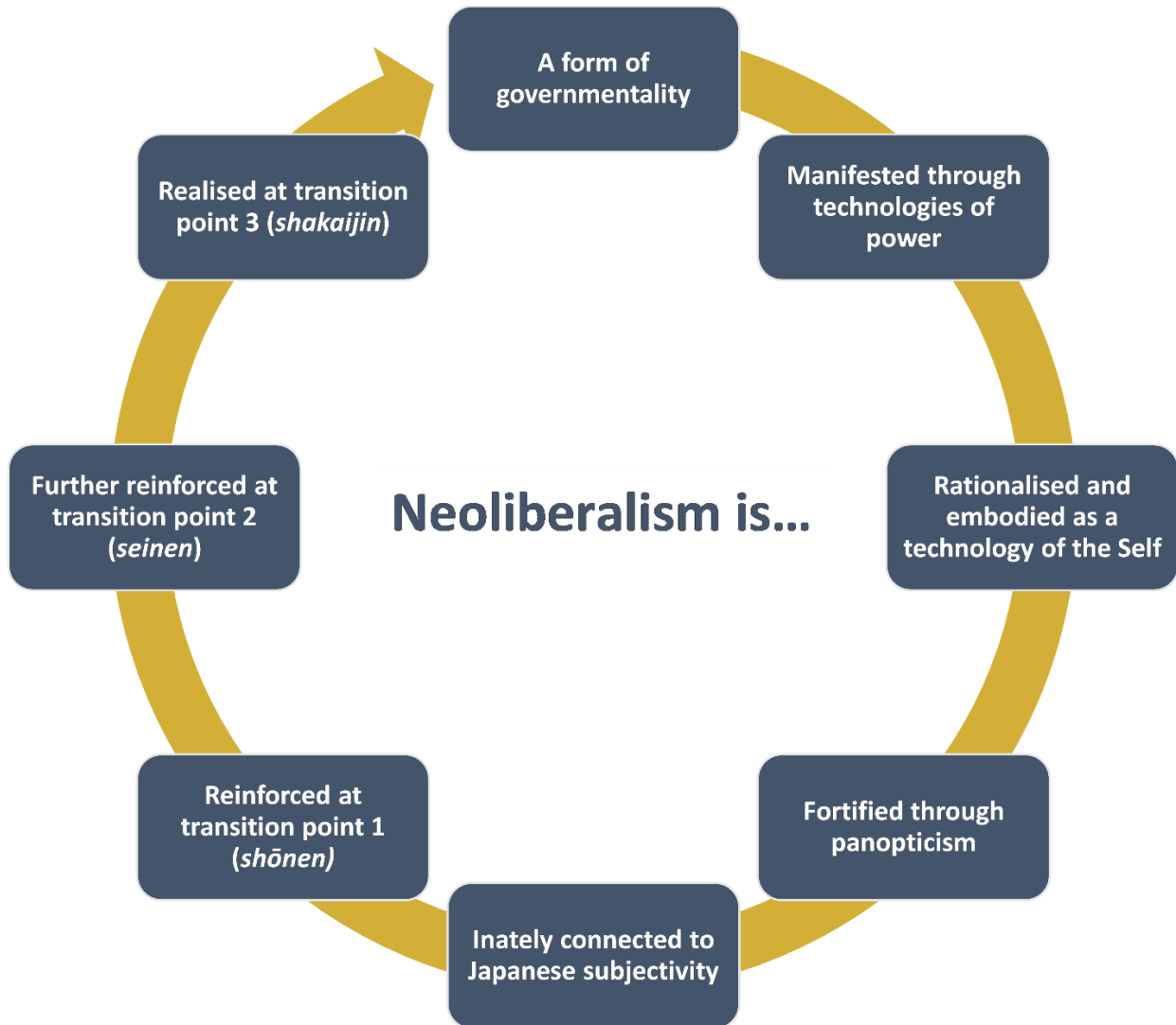
Thus, it is seemingly inevitable that a sizeable number of third- and fourth-year students lose enthusiasm for their studies as they struggle to “emerge as new Japanese businesspeople in training” (Uehara, 2016). The expectation that HEIs produce mature and governable subjects instead of academically-orientated graduates leaves us with one fundamental question: ‘What, exactly, *is* HE for?’ If the knowledge gleaned from four years of expensive university schooling is irrelevant to school-to-work transitions, and the majority of HEIs are not taken seriously by recruiters, the ability of Japan’s HE system to meaningfully improve *seinen* academically is compromised. Indeed, Yano (2013) is particularly scathing, describing the “commotion of job-seeking activities carried out by students while neglecting their studies for 18 months [as] an overly stupid Japanese-style event” (p. 66). Stupid? Perhaps, yet also inevitable in light of MEXT’s pivot toward NPM. Indeed, graduate placement results are vital sales points in an increasingly decentralised system, where universities survive through tuition fees and the capacity to harmonise with market demands. In line with NPM’s Social Darwinist arena, the ‘strong’ survive at the expense of the ‘weak’; it is only natural that HEIs support learners in *shūkatsu* to the point where it adversely affects studies (Uehara, 2016).

Chapter Summary & Research Gaps

In sum, this literature review details how governmentality reshaped Japanese education through the technologies of NPM, self-esteem, normalisation, and responsabilisation, evolving an allegedly egalitarian system into an economically Darwinist quasi-market. Subsumed and rationalised under the pretence of globalisation, ‘units’ of human capital contributing to “the further development of Japan as a nation” (MEXT, 2003) reap the rewards of this enterprise society. Conversely, those who fail to meet the terms of this normalised and, for that matter, unsolicited social debt *must* enact responsabilised self-care. Only then can they make “a contribution for the sake of society” (Roberson, 1995, p. 307) and, in turn, achieve a better quality of life (Rose, 1999). It is well-noted, however, that the window of opportunity to enact ‘right’ from ‘wrong’ is finite (Hamaaki et al., 2013; Runnebaum, 2016; Kawanishi, 2020), driving scores of households to private and shadow education to carve out a competitive edge. In this context, educational transition points scaffolding lifelong entrepreneurial projects coincide with culturally embedded rites of passage, with maturation as responsible and ‘functional’ adults largely contingent on the subject’s capacity to incorporate skills and outlooks necessary to the market order. Despite the growing body of literature detailing Japanese education’s inflexions with neoliberalism (i.e., Dubin, 2023; Samuell, 2024a; Smith, 2022b), however, scholarly work has thus far failed to accommodate ideographic accounts of learners within a policy-level analysis of governmentality—a gap my research

question seeks to address. Earlier, I presented a linear flowchart as a diagrammatic representation of this chapter's trajectory. However, one must understand that governmentality is *cyclical* (Figure 3). Through 'common-sense' appreciations of credentialism and brand value, entrepreneurial projects feed back into the norms and structures governing them, reproducing governmentality across generations (Freeland, 1996; Kelly, 2006).

Figure 3. The cyclical process of Japanese neoliberalism.



How does Japan's enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?

With this bottom-up research question in view, I seek to explore governmentality *in practice*. As highlighted, MEXT's pivot toward neoliberal marketisation has been subjected to fierce scholarly critique (i.e., Ogawa, 2013; Okura Gagné, 2020; Kubota & Takeda, 2020; Yamane et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, phenomenological accounts of Japanese governmentality present a gap in the literature. Indeed, Franzén (2015) notes that governmentality generally suffers from a dearth of primary research. Given MEXT's clear prioritisation of TGUP colleges in terms of funding, infrastructure, and prestige, constituent HEIs present opportunities to explore lived entrepreneurial selfhood in terms of the past (*shōnen/shōjo*), present (*seinen*) and intended future (*shakaijin*)—in essence, the *lifelong* institutional biography posited by Kelly (2006). Through NPM, Japanese HE presents a technology of responsabilisation, wherein *seinen* “are to be transformed and ethically reconstructed into prudential and self-governing individuals who take full responsibility for their lives and actions and align themselves with the neo-liberal project of governing” (Franzén, 2015, pp. 252-253). Certainly, evidence suggests that HE serves to prepare subjects for the labour market as much as it enlightens them (i.e., Yano, 2013; Uehara, 2016; Kawanishi, 2020). In this context, what is the *actual* purpose of HE if not to instil knowledge? Again, scant literature explores first-hand accounts of this practice, a gap that this thesis, in part, seeks to address.

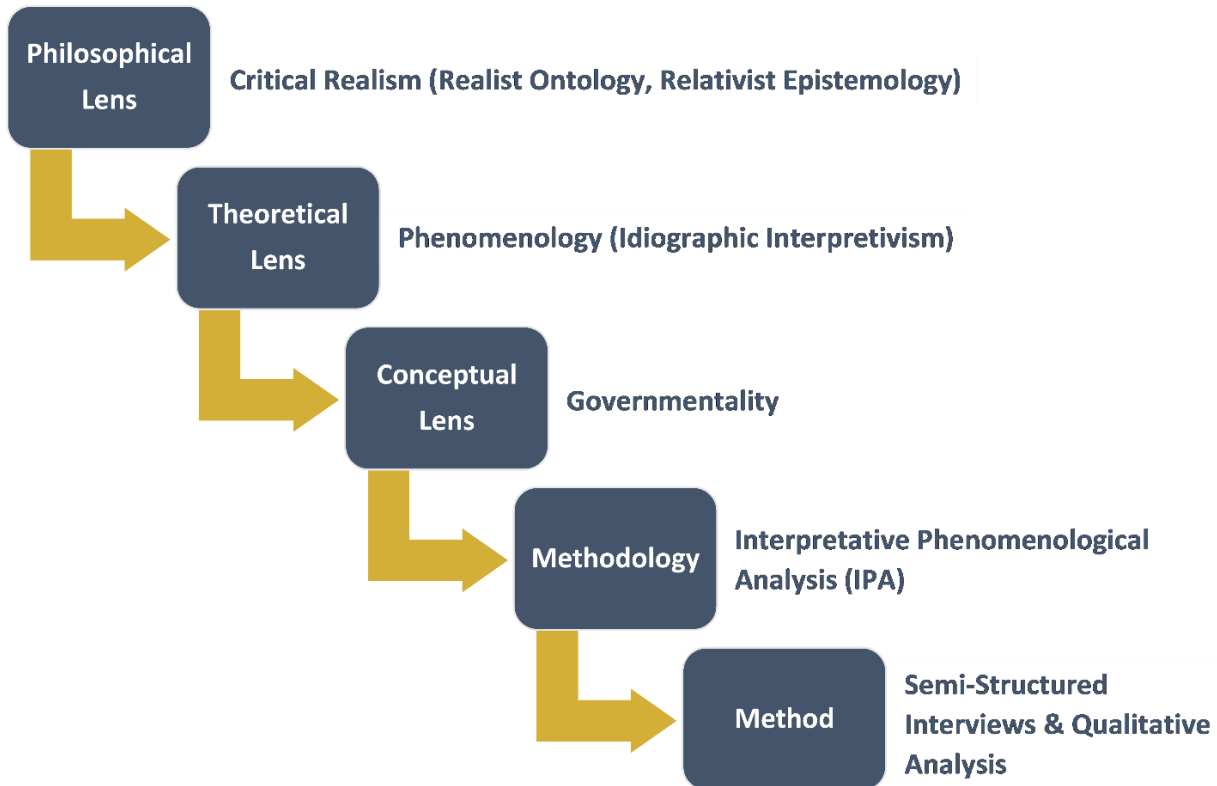
METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction & Research Strategy

This chapter describes my project’s philosophical, conceptual, and methodological foundations. Appreciating that social inquiry “begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher” (Denzin, 1986, p. 12), I first establish my positionality and the dispositions to be bracketed during data analysis. From here, I clarify my philosophical stance, *critical realism*, unpacking its ontological-realist and epistemological-relativist premise (Raduescu & Vessey, 2009). Next, I justify the coupling of critical realism to Foucauldian governmentality before establishing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as my bottom-up research design. Finally, I address the validity and ethical criteria for qualitative research before summarising this chapter. To aid navigation, the methodology used to address my open research question is presented visually in Figure 4:

How does Japan’s enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?

Figure 4. This study’s methodology.



Researcher Positionality

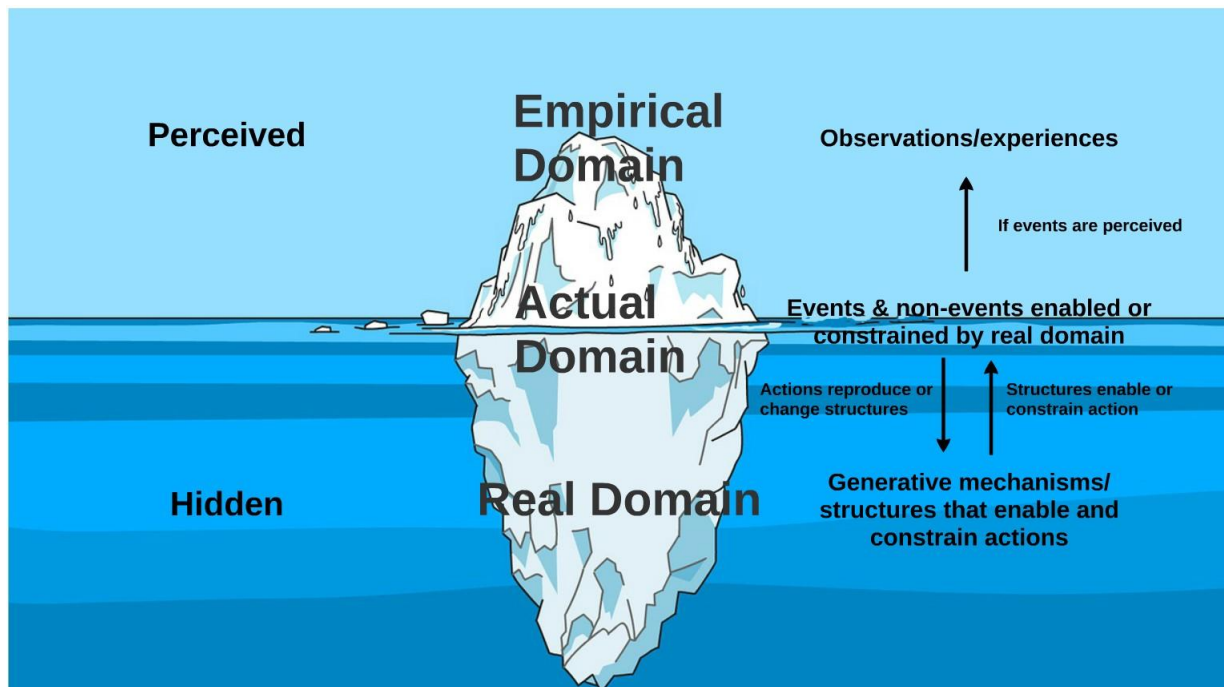
To invoke reflexivity, researchers must recognise their implicit beliefs and the potential impact of these views on their analysis. Thus, by disclosing what I take for granted, you may make informed judgements on how these biases shape my stance relative to the context under study. Central to this is how I perceive reality and knowledge. At a base level, my research reflects the “subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman, 2012, p. 30). Accordingly, I *broadly* identify with the interpretive school and, while recognising the value of quantitative studies, remain sceptical of the positivist assertion that truth is value-free. Consonant with IPA, my research question is open, seeking to capture lived subjectivities and experiences through bottom-up analysis; this is not to suggest that I endorse *boundless* relativism, however. Structures independent of human perception, such as economic and class systems, aid or constrain thoughts and actions. Yet, the knowledge created through interactions with these structures remains contingent on subjective interpretation. As such, I require a stance premised on ontological realism and epistemological relativism. Thus, rather than strict dualism, I identify with *critical realism*, a paradigm standing against the weaknesses inherent to both positivism *and* interpretivism. I will return to critical realism shortly; first, I will disclose my background and its potential influence on this thesis. My desire to explore neoliberalism is shaped, to a large degree, by my working-class upbringing in Northeast England. Raised in a politically-left household during the height of Thatcherism, I was conditioned to distrust two institutions: The Conservative Party and Arsenal Football Club. I am no ‘working-class hero’, however; I acknowledge that “neoliberal governmentality—as a symbolic technology of (re)production—subjugates all whom it touches” (Smith, 2022a, p. 9). I do not judge or denigrate the privileged, instead acknowledging that they, too, are ‘cogs in the machine’.

Regardless, I am fully aware that my subjectivities must be accounted for through ethical research procedures, bracketing, and a dedication to critical reflexivity, all of which will be discussed in this chapter. For now, please understand that positionality and reflexivity concerns largely drove my choice of IPA as a (highly rigorous) research method, which, I hope, will be evidenced throughout my analysis. Before pressing forth, and without wishing to fall into the trap of researchers excessively “talking about themselves rather than about their object of research” (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989, p. 35), let me address the elephant in the room: cross-cultural research. Having lived in Northeast Asia for over a decade, I am well-versed in many of the traditions indicative of Confucian heritage cultures; I remain, however, an outsider. With this in mind, any research I produce within this context will be *etic*. Nevertheless, researcher positionality is best understood in scale rather than as a strict binary. While I prefer equal and reciprocal collaboration between researcher and participant, I concede that my role as a former educator at the HEI under scrutiny will limit me to outsider collaboration with insiders via non-equivalent relationships (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Regarding communication, Japanese is commonly understood to be amongst the most challenging languages for non-natives due to its high-context nature. Indeed, it is common for locals to resort to restricted codes to maintain in-group harmony. From this perspective, it is challenging for non-Japanese to ‘read between the lines’ when discussing social issues. Thus, irrespective of my working proficiency in the language, this limitation must be accounted for through a reflexive, culturally sensitive approach accounting for power relations and socio-linguistic differences that I will detail soon.

Philosophical Lens: Critical Realism

Bhaskar's (1978, 1998) *critical realism* stands against the narrow 'paradigm wars' of the 1980s, viewing the positivist-constructivist duality as ontologically and epistemically limiting. Critical realism rejects positivism's "epistemic fallacy" (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 27), wherein, through its closed methodological foundation, the nature of being (ontology) is reduced to our knowledge of it (epistemology). This critique extends to 'strong' constructivism's open epistemic basis, whereby reality emerges *solely* from human experience. Notwithstanding these differences, each paradigm "reduces reality to human knowledge, whether that knowledge acts as lens or container" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182). As part of a balanced approach, critical realism insists that the social and natural sciences remain grounded within an explicit ontology encompassing the *real*, *actual*, and *empirical* domains (Morton, 2006). In doing so, it accepts positivism's ontological realism, wherein reality exists independently of our knowledge of it, *and* constructivism's epistemic relativism, where "knowledge is conditioned by our prior social and historical knowledge and experiences" (Raduescu & Vassey, 2009, p. 1). By accepting ontology as not reducible to epistemology, critical realism creates spaces for understanding open, uncontrollable social systems while accounting for the causal mechanisms driving said systems. As such, the paradigm is "useful for analyzing social problems and suggesting solutions for social change" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182). Bhaskar's (1978) causal mechanisms, presented in Figure 5 and visualised through an iceberg metaphor (Anderson, 2020), remain central to this stratified ontology.

Figure 5. Critical realism's stratified ontology. *Note.* From Anderson (2020).



Following Costas Batlle (2017), critical realism proposes three strata of reality: the *real* (why), the *actual* (what), and the *empirical* (who). While nested, one must note that no domain is more or less authentic than the other, nor do they function autonomously (Fletcher, 2017). Occupying the most perceptible layer, the *empirical domain* constitutes the quotidian events experienced, observed and understood through human interpretation. Thus, while empirically measurable, these acts are filtered through *fallible* human perception. Moreover, at this level of reality, beliefs, perceptions, and actions anchor to events occurring in and via the *actual* and *real* domains (Anderson, 2020). In this inquiry, the empirical layer of reality derives from experiences lived and interpreted by learners as they navigate Japan's enterprise society. Examples may include their views on educational transitions, learning content, and job hunting. However, given the imperfect nature of human interpretation, these experiences must always be analysed with the preceding domains in view (Costas Batlle, 2017). The *actual* level of reality manifests through intricate social structures that impel or restrict conduct—i.e., Japan's NPM-derived education system. Crucially, there exists no filter of human experience within this domain. Events transpire whether we experience them; thus, while accurate, they may differ from those observed at the empirical level.

These structures are intangible, the products of human behaviour. Thus, actions within systems maintain or modify them; we *always* hold a degree of agency. A rational learner subjected to NPM-derived education will likely perform to the best of their abilities, reinforcing test culture as a reality of the system. Echoing Ball's embedded chooser, Anderson (2020) notes that such behaviour is transmissible: "if you have children of your own, you will likely teach them how to behave in a classroom, perpetuating those social structures into the future" (p. 46). Finally, the *real* domain signifies the deepest layer of social reality, accounting for the 'causal mechanisms' structuring events in the *actual* and, in turn, actions within the *empirical* (Costas Batlle, 2017). This layer of reality may, for example, explore "the potential causal mechanisms associated with measurement from prior literature" (Raduescu & Vassey, 2009, p. 4)—i.e., existing theory. Yet, if connecting analyses to a philosophical or conceptual framework, Bhaskar (1979) implores us to "recognize the conditional nature of all its results" (p. 6). As such, neoliberal governmentality must be treated as the starting point, *not* the end goal, something that "facilitates a deeper analysis that can support, elaborate, or deny that theory to help build a new and more accurate explanation of reality" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 184).

Within this context, the technologies and rationalities upholding governmentality are causal mechanisms—the properties inherent to objects that produce events in the *empirical*. Nevertheless, lived experiences must pass through the *actual* structures maintaining the education system, a balance that entrepreneurial subjects *choose* to uphold (Anderson, 2020, p. 46). Critical realism holds that subjective experiences within external structures "determine the outcomes of social phenomena" (Byers, 2013, p. 11). Against this background, neoliberalism cannot be understood through causal mechanisms alone, nor may it be comprehended solely through lived experience. Hence, the paradigm addresses the weakness inherent to strict positivist-interpretivist dualism. Methodologically, Brönnimann (2022) describes interviewing as the "quintessential instrument" of critical realist inquiry, allowing practitioners to comprehend and disclose complex social phenomena through richly textured accounts. Here, researchers engage in reflexive trial-

and-error, moving between observed empirical events and case reality, including “any assumptions made about the ways a presumed mechanism is thought to operate” (Brönnimann, 2022, p. 6). It should also be noted, however, that critical realism remains methodologically pluralistic (Wynn & Williams, 2020), allowing for innovative techniques if the phenomena and research questions under study drive methodological choices and not vice versa (McEvoy & Richards, 2006).

Conceptual Lens: Integrating Governmentality and Critical Realism

Having already discussed governmentality (and applied it to Japanese education), I feel it necessary to justify ‘mixing’ Foucauldian theory with critical realism, given their opposing ontological and epistemological foundations. Foucault went to great pains to avoid exposing his “choices of method” (Foucault, 1998a, p. 461), stressing that research techniques *must* reflect the phenomena under study (Ferreira-Neto, 2018). As with critical realism (Wynn & Williams, 2020), this pluralistic position (Raaper & Olssen, 2017), in effect, ties Foucauldian heuristics to a range of methodological and conceptual approaches. Indeed, Foucault (1991) viewed his works not as a substantive doctrine but as “philosophical fragments put to work in a historical field of problems” (p. 74) that stand against “dogmatic assertions... to be taken or left en bloc” (Foucault, 1989, p. 275). Notwithstanding Foucault’s (2011) desire to leave only “the most intelligible outline possible” (p. 76), academics have connected his work to realism. From Frauley’s (2007, p. 266) claim that “Foucault’s mode of analysis, with its attention to differing orders, can be seen as a type of realist ontology” to Leiter’s (2019) account of “Foucault’s critical and realist project”. Yet, it is inarguable that critical realism demands accounts of agency *and* structure (Bhaskar, 1978). By contrast, Foucault’s work, while initially grounded in structuralism, “leaves little room for agency in the sense understood by critical realists ... [and] gradually loses its conception of structure” (Joseph, 2004, p. 151). In essence, Foucault (1995) is not *necessarily* concerned with where and by whom power is exercised but with its processes and outcomes. Before throwing out the conceptual baby with the philosophical bathwater, however, let us consult Foucault (2014):

Theoretical work—and I am not in any way saying this out of pride or vanity, but rather with a profound sense of my inability—does not consist in establishing and fixing the set of positions on which I would stand. (p. 76)

As highlighted previously and emphasised here, Foucault, like Bhaskar, was open to conceptual and methodological adaptations of his work. Ferreira-Neto (2018), too, describes Foucauldian pluralism as aiding “the construction of innovative contributions”, while Nicholls (2009) laments “researchers deploying a postmodern approach who use the umbrella of Foucault’s methodological pluralism as an excuse for poor scholarship, a ‘vague epistemological position’, or a ‘non-specific mode of analysis’” (p. 31). One suspects that exclaiming ‘methodological pluralism’ before pressing forth unincumbered would, indeed, be judged as ‘poor’, ‘vague’, and ‘unspecific’ scholarship. With this in mind, it is important to reconcile governmentality and critical realism’s ontological and epistemological foundations. Foucault calls on a relational, philosophical-Nietzschean lens to posit that the self is a historically-situated being, responding to *regimes of*

truth which are constructed and reconstructed through power relations, discourses, and practices (Raaper, 2019). In this regard, reality is not fixed but contingent on historical, social, and institutional contexts. More pointedly, “power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1998b, p. 63). Bhaskar (1978, 1998), meanwhile, posits an ontological depth where underlying structures and mechanisms exist independently of our perceptions. As highlighted previously, these structures generate observable phenomena but are not always directly visible or immediately accessible. It may be argued, therefore, that combining perspectives offers a more comprehensive understanding of reality. Foucault’s (1978, 1980) relational ontology helps us analyse social phenomena’s contingent and contextual nature, while Bhaskar’s (1978) critical realism reminds us of the underlying causal powers and generative mechanisms that operate regardless of our awareness. Indeed, Frauley (2007, p. 259) notes the lack of a depth ontology as “a major weakness of the dominant current within governmentality studies”, highlighting critical realism as a potential remedy to this critique.

Epistemologically, Foucault (1979, 1980) challenges traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality, emphasising the situatedness of knowledge within power dynamics and highlighting how one’s perspectives and experiences shape ‘valid’ knowledge. Bhaskar (1978), meanwhile, offers a critical perspective, acknowledging the role of social contexts and perspectives while arguing for the existence of objective structures and mechanisms that transcend individual perceptions. Hence, integrating these perspectives allows for a more reflexive and contextualised approach to knowledge. Foucault’s emphasis on power and discourse encourages us to question dominant narratives and consider how knowledge is produced, while Bhaskar reminds us of the importance of uncovering causal mechanisms and structures. Integration, therefore, may lead to more robust and nuanced analyses. When studying education, Foucauldian insights can help us better understand how power relations influence curriculum development and pedagogical practices, while critical realism prompts us to explore the underlying social structures that perpetuate access and outcomes. Thus, given the methodological pluralism championed by both Foucault (1998, 2014) and Bhaskar (1986), combining governmentality and critical realism enriches our understanding of social reality, with this multilateral approach accounting for the contingent nature of reality *and* the underlying mechanisms shaping it.

Considering my research question, *how does Japan’s enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?*, I hope that, by using a pluralistic ‘relational-depth’ approach, I develop a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between Japanese neoliberalism, governmentality, and social outcomes. Regarding existing research, meanwhile, Hobson (2010, p. 256) describes a growth in “realist governmentality” studies, with Müller et al. (2017) drawing on a Bhaskarian-Foucauldian lens to quantitatively assess the impacts of governance and neoliberal governmentality on organisational success, noting that structural variables moderate the respective governmentality-success relationship. In a conceptual study on anti-social behaviour policy, Parr (2009, p. 363) “contends that critical realism could effectively complement governmentality perspectives” by enabling researchers to move beyond descriptive accounts and into causal analysis. More recently, and strengthening the above argument, Neumann and Sending (2021) call for a widened scope, noting that “governmentality studies should draw on compatible and overlapping approaches to the

social”. Finally, and most fittingly to this study, Costas Batlle (2017) drew on a critical realist Foucauldian approach to analyse neoliberal governmentality within a UK sports charity, finding that “non-formal education is a site where neoliberal values of personhood can flourish” (p. 289).

Research Design: IPA

Before detailing *my* use of IPA, I will outline its theoretical basis to justify its inclusion in this study. To address my research question via critical realist governmentality, I must draw on an interpretive research design committed to honouring the biographic journeys of entrepreneurial subjects. In this regard, IPA is an ideal instrument for examining lived experience through semi-structured interviewing of limited and homogenous samples (Groenewald, 2004; Smith et al., 2022). Rather than making generalisable claims, whereby “the results of the research can be transferred to other contexts and situations beyond the scope of the study context” (Jensen, 2008, p. 886), IPA maintains an idiographic stance, seeking detailed accounts of individual meaning-making within the scope of significant life events²² (Smith & Osborne, 2008). Thus, as with my philosophical stance and positionality, IPA recognises social agents as self-interpreting beings or individuals “actively engaged in interpreting the events, objects and people in their lives” (Smith & Eatough, 2012, p. 441). Calling on Husserlian-Heideggerian phenomenological reduction, IPA demands a ‘stripping away’ of researcher biases via bracketing, or concerted efforts to suspend prejudices through reflection. In doing so, IPA acknowledges bias’ inevitability, viewing it not *necessarily* as an obstacle but following Gadamer’s (2004) hermeneutic extension of phenomenology, something to be engaged with “fruitfully for the purpose of understanding” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 195). Thus, IPA engages in a two-stage (double) hermeneutic, wherein “participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 53).

Consonant with my philosophical lens and research question, Fade (2004) describes IPA as “rooted in critical realism” (p. 647) owing to its commitment to honouring insider experiences occurring within a reality independent of their subjective conceptualisations. Harris (2010), too, connects the methodological and philosophical paradigms, noting that the former is particularly suited to research “concerned with the participants’ experiences of reality, not the reality itself” (p. 73), lending further credence to its inclusion here. Additionally, in developing IPA, Smith et al. (2009, 2022) cite leading phenomenological and hermeneutic figures, including Husserl, Gadamer, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, as directly influencing their framework. The latter two are significant, given their noted impact on Foucault (1988b). With regards to IPA, Heidegger’s notion “that our being-in-the-world is always perspectival, always temporal, and always ‘in-relation-to’ something” as well as his conception of bracketing as “a cyclical process and as something which can only be partially achieved” are of particular importance (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 13-20). Merleau-Ponty’s concerns for subjectivity and embodiment, too, emerge as central to IPA, with his view that “the body shapes the fundamental character of our knowing about the world” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 14) being especially relevant. In this regard, body-in-the-world—in both a physical

²² This is not to say that IPA stands against transferability, simply that “it is committed to the painstaking analysis of cases rather than jumping to generalizations” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 56).

and cognitive sense—drives our phenomenological experiences. Here, the connection between IPA and Foucault’s ‘disciplined body’ emerges.

Thus, IPA *necessitates* a dual phenomenological-hermeneutic structure, asserting that “without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37). More simply, IPA is phenomenological as it aims to get as close as possible to its research participants’ lived experiences; it is hermeneutic due to its recognition of interpretation as an endeavour borne by *both* researcher and participant, which, again, reflects my desire for open and reciprocal collaboration when interviewing. Regarding IPA’s use in Foucauldian literature, Johnson et al. (2004) note that the two approaches are pragmatically compatible insofar as “the choice of approach should be based upon the goals of the research” and that “the same phenomenon can be constructed in different ways” (p. 364). Bennett and Harden (2019) drew on a joint IPA-governmentality lens to explore UK health promotion strategies, while Crooke (2021) embedded the approach within a feminist epistemic standpoint to problematise barriers to tertiary education for autistic learners. With this genre in view, Brocki and Wearden (2006) describe a rich history of IPA research in health psychology, given its origins in this field. As detailed previously, however, little governmentality research exists within the Japanese HE context, with the majority conceptual (i.e., Doerr & Sato, 2011; Ogawa, 2013; Okura Gagné, 2020; Yamane et al., 2020). Again, I do not mean to critique, only to highlight lived entrepreneurialism within Japan’s enterprise society as fertile ground for Foucauldian IPA. Indeed, IPA, by its very nature, is “especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or *novelty*²³” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 55).

Moving toward the epistemic and practical features of IPA, Smith et al. (2022) note a preference for research questions focusing on the *how*²⁴, i.e., “people’s understandings of their experiences” (p.41). As with my example, they should be exploratory, broad, and open (Smith & Osborne, 2008; Smith et al., 2009), with secondary research questions deemed *optional* (Smith et al., 2022, p. 43). As with IPA, I do not seek to ‘prove’ or ‘validate’ a pre-determined thesis but ‘capture’ meaning-making and shared phenomena through semi-structured interviewing (Smith et al., 2022). Regarding interview sample sizes, Smith et al. (2009) stress that there is no ‘correct’ number of participants; saturation is achieved when meaningful points of comparison and contrast between accounts emerge. Nonetheless, the authors advise junior scholars to maintain relatively compact sample sizes, stating that, for professional doctorates, such as an EdD, “between six and ten [participants] are adopted” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 46). Hence, I interviewed nine participants. This figure also corresponds with phenomenological research generally, with Groenewald (2004) stating a preference for two-to-ten research subjects, Creswell (2013) a minimum of five, and Egitim (2022) six. Given IPA’s focus on shared phenomena and limited sample sizes, participants *must* be selected purposively rather than through probability, with the opportunity method used during the study fitting this criterion (Smith et al., 2022). Opportunity sampling through

²³ Emphasis added.

²⁴ While primary research questions are not required to begin with ‘how’ in order to unpack participant meaning-making, Smith et al. (2009) provide several model examples, each of which do.

canvassing former students allowed me to tap into easily accessible groups of individuals, reducing recruitment time without compromising my study's focus on lived experience.

My inclusion criteria are relatively open: all participants must be Japanese nationals currently enrolled in a TGUP college, having undertaken most of their education in Japan. Their age, gender, grade, degree path, and degree level remain flexible; however, they should ideally possess a strong command of English, given IPA's demand for verbatim transcription (Smith et al., 2022) and my working command of Japanese. Given the open nature of my research question, it was hoped that equally open inclusion criteria would allow for a diverse range of perspectives and experiences to emerge from the data. By keeping factors such as age, gender, grade, and degree paths flexible, I aimed to capture the nuances of how learners within the TGUP system make sense of their varying educational experiences. Considering the above, one must account for Gerber et al.'s (2014) claim that purposively-selected limited subject populations may compromise research transferability. Again, it bears repeating that IPA, by its idiographic nature, is not *necessarily* concerned with transferable findings. Smith (1999) argues that it is more important "to find levels of analysis which enable us to see patterns across case studies while still recognising the particularities of the individual lives from which those patterns emerge" (p. 424). Donmoyer (2008), too, calls for flexibility, noting that "reading qualitative accounts of radically different cases could produce enriched cognitive schema ... [which] ... would allow for a kind of intellectual generalisation even when settings are radically different" (p. 372). That said, methodologically-sound qualitative inquiry *must* account for transferability on some level, with my IPA following the Gertzian (1973) anthropological tradition of *thick description*, or analysts providing "rich, transparent, and conceptualized analysis of the accounts of participants" (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 45-46), which will be detailed in *ethical and validity considerations*.

Research Site & Participants

As previously stated, IPA studies emphasise small, homogeneous samples to deeply explore how a specific group of people experience a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). By selecting participants from a single TGUP university, I hope to ensure interviewees share a similar contextual background while retaining unique subjectivities. Located in Kansai, the economic and cultural hub of West Japan, Western University (WU)²⁵ was founded in the late 1800s by an American missionary and currently offers programs across four campuses. In particular, WU is well-known for its economics, business administration, and international studies programs, with this study's participants drawn exclusively from the latter. Indeed, as a TGUP institution, WU maintains a core focus on internationalisation, encouraging students to study abroad and at WU through bilateral exchange programs. As such, the college is highly regarded, consistently ranking among Japan's top private universities. Following recent data, WU places in the top five regionally in terms of overall brand popularity (Shingakunet, 2023) and records a *hensachi* of 66 (Toshin, 2023), placing it among the top 6.6% of universities nationwide (Matsuoka, 2013). As a corporate 'escalator' institution, WU operates several satellite schools that provide the university with high-achieving applicants; these include Western Senior High School (WSHS), which shares the university's main campus, and Western International School (WIS), a highly selective English

²⁵ Pseudonyms used for all institutions.

immersion school that costs up to ¥1,642,000 (US\$11,300) per annum (Western International School of Western University, 2023). Of this study’s nine participants, four attended one of these schools. Returning to sampling, I drew on the previously described opportunity technique, informally approaching WU students meeting my inclusion criteria through email and in-person meetings, describing the rough outline of my intended study, and emphasising voluntary participation and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and anonymity. Each interviewee’s demographic information and educational history can be found in Table 2 below, with thick descriptions of interview participants found in [Appendix 1](#), a practice recommended by Guba (1981) and Ponterotto and Grieger (2007) to save unnecessary word expenditure.

Table 2. Demographic and educational histories of this study’s participants.²⁶

Participant	Age	Gender	Academic Grade	Major	English Level (CEFR)	History of Juku Participation	School-to University Transition Type	University-educated Parents	Total Interview Duration
Kenji	20	M	3	International Politics	C1	Yes	Escalator (WIS)	Both	141 min.
Elisa	21	F	3	International Studies	B2	Yes	Recommendation	Both	106 min.
Dream	21	F	3	International Studies	B2	Yes	Exam	Neither	136 min.
Hana	20	F	3	International Studies	B2	Yes	Recommendation	Both	125 min.
Sachiko	20	F	3	International Relations	B2	Yes	Escalator (WIS)	Mother	131 min.
Kaori	19	F	1	International Studies	B1	Yes	Recommendation	Neither	115 min.
Yuuki	21	M	3	International Relations	C1	Yes	Escalator (WIS)	Both	100 min.
Yoshiko	22	F	4	International Communication	B2	Yes	Recommendation	Both (Mother Graduate School)	148 min.
Taiki	22	M	4	International Studies	B2	Yes	Escalator (WSHS)	Both	135 min.

Data Collection & Analysis

To unpack the causal technologies shaping Japan’s enterprise society, I must gather primary data at the *empirical* (lived) level, which may, in turn, be examined relating to the *actual* (NPM education) and *real* (governmentality) domains. Through this multilayered reality, critical realists seek pragmatic data collection and analysis techniques to theorise lived phenomena (Haigh et al., 2019). Hood (2016) calls for a dual phenomenological critical realist lens due to their shared ability “to identify mechanisms of change, as well as the contextual factors that affect those mechanisms” (p. 172). Indeed, critical realist inquiry benefits from pluralistic approaches that place idiographic accounts within context, including policy (Rata, 2014; Couch, 2020). In the present study, research

²⁶ Following TOEIC Malaysia (2022), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Scale categorises users in terms of the following: C1 (highest): proficient user, B2: independent user (vantage), B1: independent user (threshold), A2: basic user (waystage), A1 (lowest) basic user (breakthrough).

began following Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee approval on January 17th, 2023, upon which I sought verbal consent²⁷ from participants meeting the inclusion criteria. Thereafter, multi-lingual information and informed consent forms ([Appendices 2 and 3](#)) allowed participants “to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset” (Bryman, 2012, p. 140). All forms were distributed at least one week before interviews to provide adequate time to familiarise with the study. To ensure ethical human subject protocols and, consistent with Smith et al. (2022), participants were informed that all interviews would be confidential, they held the right to withdraw from the study until the point of data analysis, and would be referred to using pseudonyms in research notes, analyses, and findings.

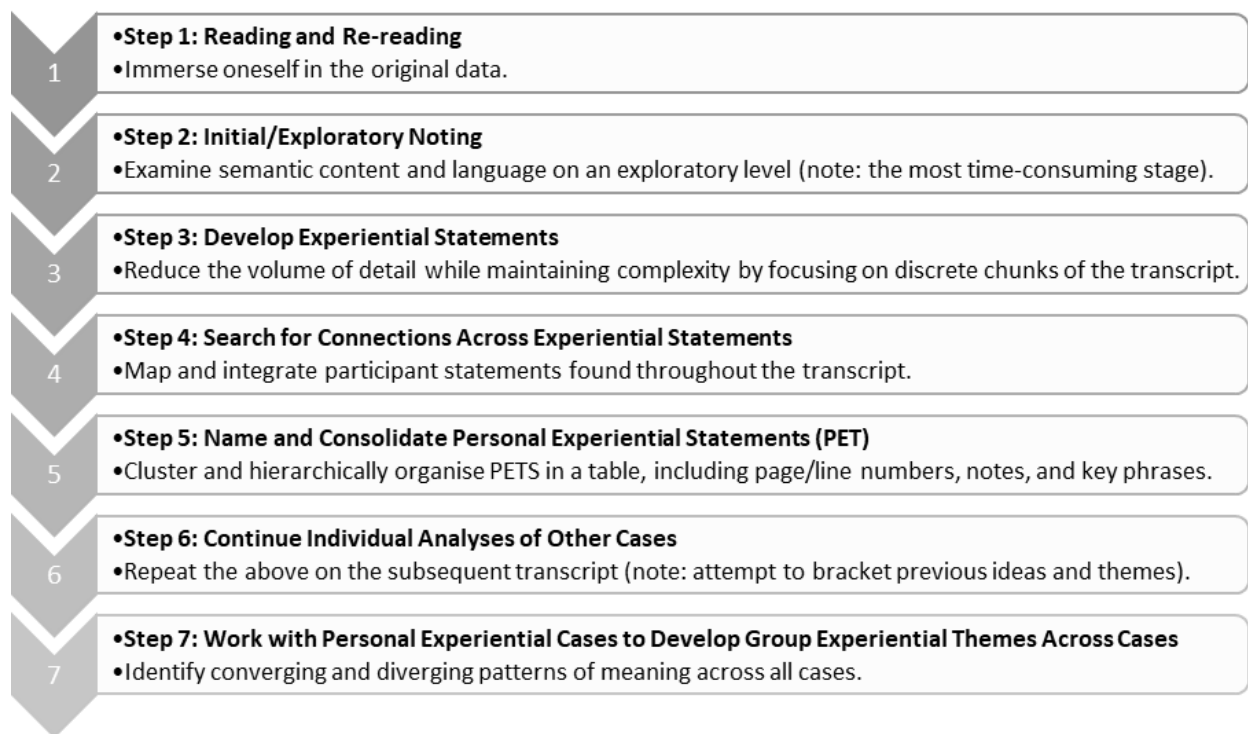
Following my desire for open and collaborative discussion, disrupting hegemonic researcher-subject relations, and securing a safe interviewing space, participants were encouraged to set the locations and times of sessions, with the majority selecting WU. Face-to-face interviewing followed the flexible, semi-structured design considered ‘exemplary’ for IPA (Smith & Osborne, 2008; Eatough & Smith, 2017). Initial 90-120-minute audio-recorded interviews took place between January 27th and February 20th, 2023, and called on an informal, non-directive style to facilitate the rapport and empathy undergirding my IPA practice (Smith & Osborne, 2008). Rather than a strictly defined list of questions, a flexible interview guide ([Appendix 4](#)) elicited organic conversations that encouraged meaning-making. To address my open research question, this guide stemmed from content covered in my literature review and published research, targeting lived experiences of Japanese education without using concepts specific to neoliberalism or Foucauldian theory; this ensured that participants could express themselves without being led. Beginning with general questions intended to provide contextual information and enhance ‘thick descriptions’, open-ended, non-dichotomous questions and follow-ups nudged participants to elaborate on their experiences (Smith & Osborne, 2008; Egitim, 2022). Here, I took an active, maieutic stance—a “naïve but curious listener” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 60)—allowing biographical reconstructions to flow naturally without interruptions. Given the idiographic basis of this project, I view participant agency as central to grasping lived entrepreneurialism, both for the respondents and, in keeping with IPA’s double hermeneutic (Smith, 2023), myself. In doing so, I sought to embody the underlying qualities of the IPA researcher: empathy, open-mindedness, patience, flexibility, and a willingness to be led into the world of my participants while remaining cognisant of non-verbal cues (Smith et al., 2009). I elected to interview in English, given IPA’s strict requirement for “a verbatim record of the data collection event” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 69); however, I also sought to honour Japanese culture. As such, I encouraged native language use if required.

Following initial interviews, I manually reproduced transcriptions of each audio-recorded session, including gesticulation, non-verbal utterances, laughter, pauses, and hesitations, with transcription aligning with Smith et al.’s (2022) standard of seven hours for every one hour of recorded sound. Given my fifteen hours of recorded interviews thus far, this was an intensive and laborious process lasting between February and May 2023, which, at times, required eight-hour workdays. During transcription, I maintained a reflexive research diary, which enhanced ethical and validity criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by recording my biases, tracked interview techniques

²⁷ Ethics protocols will be elaborated and rationalised in this chapter’s *Ethical and Validity Considerations* section.

or lines of questioning I could improve, and topics I had overlooked in initial interviews. Upon transcription, I consulted my reflexive diary and research notes to draft a follow-up interview guide ([Appendix 5](#)), which, once refined, allowed me to expand upon themes that arose during initial sessions. In doing so, I remained flexible to the meanings emerging before me, ensuring that my research process was responsive to the participants' lived experiences rather than being rigidly bound to pre-conceived ideas. Follow-up meetings with all nine participants took place from May 16th to 31st, 2023, and typically lasted 20-30 minutes, for four hours total, with secondary transcription occurring between mid-June and early-July 2023. While not maintaining an exhaustive record of total transcription time, based on Smith et al.'s (2022) standard, it can be estimated that my process took approximately 130 hours, given the nineteen hours of combined interview content. Finally, after meeting with my supervisor on July 13th, 2023, I drew upon Smith et al.'s (2022, pp. 75-108) updated guidelines for IPA (Figure 6) to begin a seven-stage analysis.

Figure 6. Smith et al.'s (2022) seven steps for IPA. *Note.* Adapted from Past and Smith (2023).



While Figure 6 helps understand IPA's practical guidelines, explaining how *I* engaged in this process is crucial. Figure 7 provides excerpts from Elisa's initial and follow-up interviews, collated using a table (a practice endorsed by Smith et al., 2022). Here, we may observe Step 1 (central column), wherein I immersed myself in the interview data, slowly and methodically *reading and re-reading* the transcript and taking written notes of my initial thoughts in my reflexive diary. Consistent with Wall et al. (2004), this technique provided a reflective anchor for bracketing during all seven phases. The length of combined initial and follow-up transcripts varied but

averaged 76 pages across nine participants. As such, Figure 7 represents only a fraction of Elisa’s contributions. While VanScoy and Evenstad (2015) recommend numbered lines to aid referral, I found using time stamps more beneficial and efficient. Step 2, meanwhile, required *exploratory noting*, wherein I attempted to strengthen my familiarity with semantic content. Exploratory noting entailed a comprehensive and detailed commentary, with observations placed throughout the right-hand column. Drawing on VanScoy and Evenstad (2015), conceptual (“C”), descriptive (“D”), and linguistic (“L”) notes detail my initial theoretical thoughts or questions on the data, description of content, and participant language choices, respectively.

Figure 7. Examples of phases 1-3 of my IPA process.

IPA Step 1 (Reading & Re-reading): see interview data.

IPA Step 2 (Exploratory Noting):

Key: (C) = conceptual; (D) = descriptive; (L) = linguistic (see: VanScoy & Evenstad. 2015, p. 346).

IPA Step 3 (Develop Experiential Statements):

Initial Interview

Experiential Statements	Interview Data	Exploratory Comments
Elisa expresses her dissatisfaction with her juku experience, citing her initial expectation of becoming smarter in various subjects and struggling with asking questions, feeling ashamed due to the proficiency of other students.	<p>Mike 25:29 So, at the time, how did you feel about studying at a juku?</p> <p>Elisa 25:33 Ahh... I didn't like juku, because... ahhh... it's like, I imagined that juku is, like.... so, when I... if I go to juku, I thought I can be... smarter, like good at like math more... good at every subject, but it's like, bad. Actually, it was like just a school, you know... one teacher interacts with, like... a lot of people, and... it's hard. It's a little bit hard to ask questions because other students are very good at, like... very good at, you know... math and a lot of stuff. So, when I ask some questions, like very simple, umm... like, simple question. I was kind of ashamed to ask.</p>	<p>(D) Wanted to improve, but juku didn't match up with her expectation. (C) Sounds like a factory? (D) It's hard to be heard. (D) She felt inferior because her questions were simple. (L) "ashamed" (C) Normalising effect of shame?</p>

Follow-up Interview

Experiential Statements	Interview Data	Exploratory Comments
Immediately communicates concern on the value of her hensachi score.	<p>Mike 09:09 Okay, good, but not good. So, the hensachi system, what do you what do you think about?</p> <p>Elisa 09:21 My hensachi is not... it's not that high.</p> <p>Mike 09:26 That doesn't matter. But what do you think about the system?</p>	<p>(L) Worries that hers is "not that high". (C) Shame?</p>
Hensachi drives competition and inspires some students to study hard.	<p>Elisa 09:37 I want to say, like, do not... don't do hensachi things. But it's very good to be... very competitive. You know, I think some people don't study hard...</p>	<p>(C) Resonates with Foucault's exploration of how external factors influence self-discipline and performance?</p>

As the most time-consuming phase, this Step sought to clarify phenomenological focus, marking what was essential to the participant while I bracketed my conceptual preconceptions. Step 3 entailed consolidating and crystalising *experiential statements* within the left-hand column, detailing “the experience of making sense” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 86). By analysing exploratory comments against their transcript fragments, Step 3 gradually reduces the volume of detail while maintaining complexity, “articulating the most important features of the exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 86). Considering Step 3 reflects “what is important to the participant, rather than what is of interest to the researcher” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 111), I thoroughly examined each quote and exploratory comment before crafting its experiential statement. In particular, *conceptual* comments aided bracketing by highlighting my prior understanding of related theory and literature, allowing me to mitigate my preconceptions, judgements, or biases. In Figure 7, for example, we may observe how I avoided inserting my understanding of Foucauldian theory (the normalising effect of shame and how it drives self-regulation and discipline) in Elisa’s experiential statements. Recognising my positionality, I ‘stepped back’ from my theoretical biases, allowing Elisa’s unique experiences to emerge authentically. This leads to Step 4, *searching for connections across experiential themes*, an example of which may be found in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Extract from experiential theme grouping.

Juku Experience:

She mentions not going to juku for an extended period.

Elisa was taught by professional and student faculty.

Some juku students want to get into a good university, although she didn't know at the time.

She attended juku in junior high school, not high school.

Juku students were ranked by seating order, with less-proficient students at the front.

She felt shocked at this system but ultimately didn't care.

Negative impact of the juku seating order on motivation and competition.

Elisa felt that she could never sit in the back, more prestigious, seats.

The seating order system was demotivating.

Hensachi Scores and Competition:

Elisa immediately communicates concern about the value of her hensachi score.

Hensachi drives competition and inspires some students to study hard.

She views hensachi as a good thing because it inspires study.

Elisa expresses skepticism about the honesty and accuracy of the hensachi system.

Recognition of hensachi as an accessory and dishonest.

This phase involves developing a mapping system, wherein I sought to group experiential statements based on shared themes. This stage is not prescriptive; I focused on organisation (i.e., seeking structure while refining, incorporating, and discarding statements), with Smith et al. (2022) stating no preference for specific techniques. As such, I clustered experiential statements as lists under bolded, general sub-headings, for example, *juku experience* or *hensachi scores and competition* (see Figure 8). Naturally, an open mind and flexibility were crucial for this phase: I followed my initial intuition yet remained open to unexpected possibilities as they emerged before me. Once initial clustering was complete, Step 5 involved naming and describing super-ordinate *personal experiential themes* (PETs) specific to each participant, for example, in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Elisa’s PET 3 and example sub-themes.

STRATEGIC ACADEMIC AWARENESS

1. Tactical awareness of non-traditional pathways

Bypassed traditional shiken jigoku based on English qualifications. P. 18:

“I didn’t experience the shiken jigoku ... I entered this university, with, you know... ahh... like... report and in... interviews. So, not, like... (emphasis) math and... history ... Because I had a qualification of Eiken... so, I can get... I can get, ahh... the exam, like just, ah... with only report and interview.”

2. Exploitation of escalator system

The escalator system is an illusion of credentialism. P. 7:

“I think, ahhh... I don’t like the system, actually. Because... in here, here. Some people, some students entered this university, ahh without... you know, with less skills. Some I know that [Redacted] is a very good, ahhh... university, but some of them... especially [Redacted] elementary school. You know, it’s an escalator?”

3. Non-academic and extracurricular efforts

Extracurricular activities are important to shūkatsu. P. 51:

“Experience of like volunteers... or experience of study abroad or internship. But I didn’t have that much, like, good... experienced that I could talk about.”

This phase entailed consolidating all previous steps, organising PETs hierarchically (highlighted in yellow to aid navigation), numbering and bolding sub-ordinate themes, and listing experiential statements (with page numbers) and transcript extracts. Following Harris (2010), PETs were selected on “both the richness of the passage and the extent to which the theme helped to illuminate the other aspects of the account” (p. 89). Thus, Step 5 allowed me to advance with a deeper

understanding of participant meaning-making. It should be noted that Figure 9 is a fraction of this PET's sub-ordinate themes and transcript extracts. Elisa's contributions, for example, totalled 13 pages, leading me to tabulate PETs and the page numbers of supporting quotes. Thus, while Figure 9 provides a single experiential statement and quote for PET 3's three sub-themes, as demonstrated in Figure 10's right-hand column, the total for each was 5, 3, and 5, respectively.

Figure 10. Elisa's tabulated PETs.

IPA Step 5 (Name and Table Personal Experiential Themes):

Table super-ordinate themes (see: VanScoy & Evenstad. 2015, p. 349).

#	PET	#	Sub-themes	Page numbers
1	Educational Motivation and Influence	1	Familial and peer influence	2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 14
		2	Societal influence	12, 26, 27
		3	School choice	6, 6, 6, 25, 25, 26, 38, 48
		4	Study abroad	7, 11, 11, 28 41, 46
2	Challenges, Acceptance, and Resilience	1	Self-doubt	3, 11, 14, 15, 27, 27-28, 32, 36, 39, 45,47, 49, 51
		2	Responsibility and autonomy	10, 12, 13, 31, 45
		3	Self-improvement and overcoming obstacles	25, 29
3	Strategic Academic Awareness	1	Tactical awareness of non-traditional pathways	18, 20, 20, 46, 46
		2	Exploitation of escalator system	7, 8, 47
		3	Non-academic and extracurricular efforts	32, 42, 42, 44, 51
4	Credentialism and Educational Culture	1	Perception of gakureki shakai	8, 8, 37, 37
		2	The general state of Japanese education	16, 16, 18, 26, 39, 39, 43, 45, 46, 46, 46, 47
		3	Fairness and equity	8, 9, 10, 17, 24
		4	Quantification and competition	15, 15, 16, 37, 40, 45, 45, 47, 48
5	Workplace Culture and Transitions	1	School-to-work transitions	26, 33, 40, 42
		2	Job-hunting process	35, 35, 35, 36, 38, 38, 40, 50, 50
		3	Global skills and mindsets	30, 31, 32, 41, 41, 41

Step 6 entailed moving to the subsequent transcript and repeating all previous steps. In keeping with IPA's idiographic commitment, I bracketed prior findings to honour participant testimonies. Bracketing is important to all phases of IPA; nevertheless, it is *essential* when moving between cases. Thus, besides maintaining a reflexive journal and highlighting my presumptions in exploratory comments, I sought to enhance bracketing further by distancing myself between cases. An awareness of my positionality—specifically my beliefs on neoliberalism—required me to be vigilant about how my background might inadvertently shape my interpretation of participant narratives. By consciously recognising my pre-judgement, I aimed to prevent my stance from clouding my analysis or imposing my views on participants. Hence, I paused analysis for several days to a week before proceeding with the following case to assess it with a clear mind. Once each transcript had undergone Steps 1 to 5, I sought to develop *group experiential themes* (GETs) across all cases (Step 7). Remembering that IPA does not seek 'averages' or 'group norms', I emphasised "shared and unique features of the experience across the contributing participants" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 100). I considered the most striking PETs across the data set, asking myself how super- and sub-ordinate themes resonated between cases. Following the extract in Figure 11, I found it helpful to list and colour-code experiential statements specific to each participant under a specific GET, which provided an initial list of 69 pages—excessive for this project. Consequently, I further refined the second draft to 41 pages of usable data. Here, tabled GETs were organised around convergences in participant experience yet also demonstrated the "unique individual way in which different participants are reflecting that shared quality"; this, as noted by Smith et al. (2008), "is a mark of a high-quality piece of IPA" (p. 101).

Further demonstrated in Figure 11, Step 7 involved alphabetising and labelling working (but not *final*) GETs and using bolded, upper-case font to aid navigation (in this case **GET A. NAVIGATING PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: AGENCY, ACCOMODATION AND STRATEGY**). From here, sub-themes were numbered and bolded in lower-case font—a navigational strategy recommended by Smith et al. (2022). Finally, I matched experiential statements and italicised transcript extracts to bolded and italicised *secondary* sub-themes, which refined the flow and connectivity between GET sub-themes. This step is not covered in the IPA literature; however, I found it helpful for visualising potential narratives and connections between user testimonies within sub-themes. This additional step allowed me to efficiently and sensitively connect user cases. For example, in Figure 11, we may observe how the sub-theme 'high school choice and transition' reflects the act of inter-family negotiation *and* tactical awareness of intra and inter-school relations (among others). If this content had been grouped under a single sub-theme, it may have been disjointed, confusing, and less coherent. Since IPA is bottom-up, incorporating a theoretical lens (such as governmentality) in Step 7 is a strategic choice as it helps generate and refine themes based on participant testimonies. Here, governmentality provides a framework to interpret and analyse the data more deeply, providing insight into how broader societal forces shape participants' experiences. In closing, my experience of IPA was enriching and highly longitudinal. From initial interviews in late January 2023, to transcribing fifteen hours of content, follow-up interviews, transcribing four hours of secondary content, enacting Steps 1-5 across nine cases, and, finally, generating and refining case-level GETs, my process lasted over ten months, ending in early December 2023. While this was a rigorous and trying undertaking, I

sincerely believe IPA was the correct ‘tool’ for the job, given my research question and context, philosophical and conceptual groundings, positionality, and background.

Figure 11. Extract from example working GET.

Kenji, Elisa, Dream, Hana, Sachiko, Kaori, Yuuki, Yoshiko, Taiki

Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

A. NAVIGATING PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: AGENCY, ACCOMODATION AND STRATEGY

1. High school choice and transition

Negotiation with parents

Choosing a preferred junior high school against parents' wishes. P. 45:

"Yes ... twelve ... No! (laughs) They didn't! ... Because my parents wanted me to go to a higher-level school."

Strong resistance and resilience to the idea of attending a regular Japanese middle school. P. 18:

"I took, you know, the moggi shiken, like, the pre-pre. And... I got, like, E and D, like, results. So, they were, like, 'maybe you should, like... you know, try it when you... when you're, like, older because we could have... we had the chance to get into the local high school.' But I was, like, 'no, like, I don't want to go to the Japanese middle school.' So, I was just, like, studying, studying, studying, studying, studying."

Made choice to attend HS and uni, which parents did not support initially. P. 6:

"Well, if anything, this was actually kind of my choice. They were actually against me coming here."

Made the choice to study at HS, which parents supported. P. 34:

"I would say it's my choice, because I told them that I wanted to go to this high school. Yeah, they support me, but it was my choice."

Tactical knowledge of intra and inter-school relationships

[Redacted] assured passage to a prestigious university. P. 24:

"If I got accepted for the high school, in [Redacted], then that's [Redacted] Group. So... not everyone, but, basically, without having a... difficult exam... I can just enter [Redacted]."

First targeted Western-U at age 15 or 16 after discovering the recommendation system. P. 51:

"15 or 16. Ahh, I knew that there was a system of recommendation. And the only way to go to a better university was recommendation (laughs). Yeah, so I was... yeah, the only choice was [Redacted]."

School's existing relationship with [Redacted] was main motivating factor to attend. PP. 36-37:

"Yeah ... because last, ah... gakureki is daiigaku, so... (laughs)."

Choice of [Redacted] influenced by its escalator status. P. 11:

"I wanted to get into [Redacted], that was the... I don't want to say easiest, but most accessible."

Confirms attended [Redacted] to avoid shiken jigoku. P. 11:

"Yes, for sure ... hmmhmm ... (laughs)."

Ethical & Quality Assurance Measures

Prior to formal participant interaction, this study's ethical implications were disclosed to the University of Bath and Western-U to conform with the UK Research Integrity Office REC and MEXT Measures Against Misconduct in Research Activities. Upon obtaining clearance and amending protocols as required, sampling and interview procedures were consistent with Diner and Crandall's (1978) list of recurring ethical transgressions to ensure that no harm came to participants, informed consent was obtained, there was no invasion of privacy, nor any deception involved. Indeed, Smith et al. (2002, p. 47) describe avoidance of harm as *the* starting point for IPA practice, with researcher reflexivity crucial when prompting others to voice potentially sensitive issues. To avoid harm and ensure epistemically just and culturally sensitive findings, I sought to protect participants from physical and mental anguish, including mediating and negotiating issues of power, wherein I attempted to recognise and balance my privilege as a researcher-educator, be cognisant of my bias through reflection and bracketing and uphold the dignity of my respondents through empathetic practice (O'Leary, 2004). This included building trust and rapport, so interviewees felt comfortable and confident in disclosing their biographical journeys. Here, I based my efforts on empathy and active listening, always focusing on my participants' experiences. Further, pre-interview procedures were consistent with Bates' (2004) principles of ethical beneficence, whereby participants received verbal and written assurance that involvement or non-involvement would have no bearing on their ongoing education and that they held the right to withdraw from the study up until the point of analysis, at which point, their data would be destroyed physically and digitally.

To provide "respondents the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset" (Bryman, 2012, p. 140), participants were provided with multilingual information and informed consent forms ([Appendices 2](#) and [3](#)), which were read and signed in my presence. Given interviews may involve sensitive issues, including politics, economics, and stratification, I clarified that these topics might arise and emphasised my commitment to privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. In doing so, I sought to avoid deception and "covert methods [that] violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied" (Bryman, 2012, p. 142). Further, I stressed that the participants were not obligated to answer my questions. Before interviewing, and consistent with the credibility technique of member checking, I informed respondents that they could access their respective transcripts and initial findings at any phase of the study and would be reminded after transcription and analysis. Finally, I asked each participant to provide me with a pseudonym of their choice, which would be used in research notes, analyses, and writing, and that I was happy to assist should they require it. Once all criteria were met, face-to-face, audio-recorded interviewing followed established quality criteria positioned to "guide the field activities and to impose checks to be certain that the proposed procedures are in fact being followed" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 330). All techniques used to guide this study are presented thematically in Table 3 and follow Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trust.

Table 3. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985, pp. 301-327) criteria and techniques for establishing trust.

Criteria	Interpretivist Terminology	Technique
Truth value	<i>Credibility</i>	Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, archiving of data, member checks.
Applicability	<i>Transferability</i>	Thick description, purposive sampling.
Consistency	<i>Dependability</i>	Overlapping methods.
Neutrality	<i>Confirmability</i>	Triangulation, reflexivity.
All criteria		Reflexive journal.

Supporting the hermeneutic belief that meaning and interpretation are finite, Lincoln and Guba (1985) concede that “[i]t is dubious whether ‘perfect’ criteria will ever emerge” (p. 331). Thus, the above techniques guided my exploration; they remained flexible and open to change. Regarding *credibility*, which seeks to ensure verisimilitude between research findings and the phenomena under study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the research site. While interviewing, I had worked at the university in question for five years and had established a solid understanding of the school, its departments, curricula, and students. Additionally, I taught and knew all the participants for at least one year. Regarding triangulation, meanwhile, “different perspectives (theories), and different methods” (Guba, 1981, p. 85) may be augmented to cross-check interpretation—in this instance, this study’s Foucauldian-critical realist lens. Member checks, meanwhile, included sharing transcripts and initial findings with their respective participants to ensure openness. Finally, referential adequacy materials, including audio files, transcripts, notes, and my reflexive diary, were secured in a locked safe box or password-encoded folder and reflected upon throughout the analysis.

Regarding *transferability*, context is provided in the Literature Review and Research Site and Participants sections. Guba (1981) notes that ‘thick descriptions’ further enhance research through supplementary materials and appendices, allowing outsiders to assess generalisable characteristics where appropriate. As such, I have attached thick descriptions of all participants in [Appendix 1](#), as well as the study’s information sheet, informed consent form, and interview guides. IPA’s requirement for purposive sampling, too, may be interpreted as strengthening transferability, with clearly delineated inclusion and exclusion criteria for homogenous groups being particularly advantageous. Additionally, in focusing on biographical journeys, my thesis’ output seeks to emphasise the dynamic interplay between individual agency and external influences (Raaper, 2020), showcasing how personal histories inform educational experiences. Through these detailed narratives, I hope to facilitate connections for readers, allowing them to extract relevant insights

and apply them to their contexts. *Dependability*, meanwhile, conforms with ‘consistency’, with quality assurance dependent on systematic methodological protocols. Given the multi-layered reality inherent to IPA and critical realism, dependability criteria *also* acknowledge that “what is being studied may not be reliable, consistent, or standard” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 60). Again, my overlapping conceptual techniques are helpful here, as is IPA’s (and, thus, *my*) fundamental commitment to rigour (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith et al., 2022), particularly through my bracketing and structured analytical protocols. Finally, *confirmability* may be strengthened by my previously described methodological triangulation and reflexivity. Indeed, Lincoln and Guba (1985) note reflexive journaling as strengthening all aspects of trustworthiness, with Guihen (2020) noting the importance of this practice to effective IPA.

Chapter Summary

How does Japan’s enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?

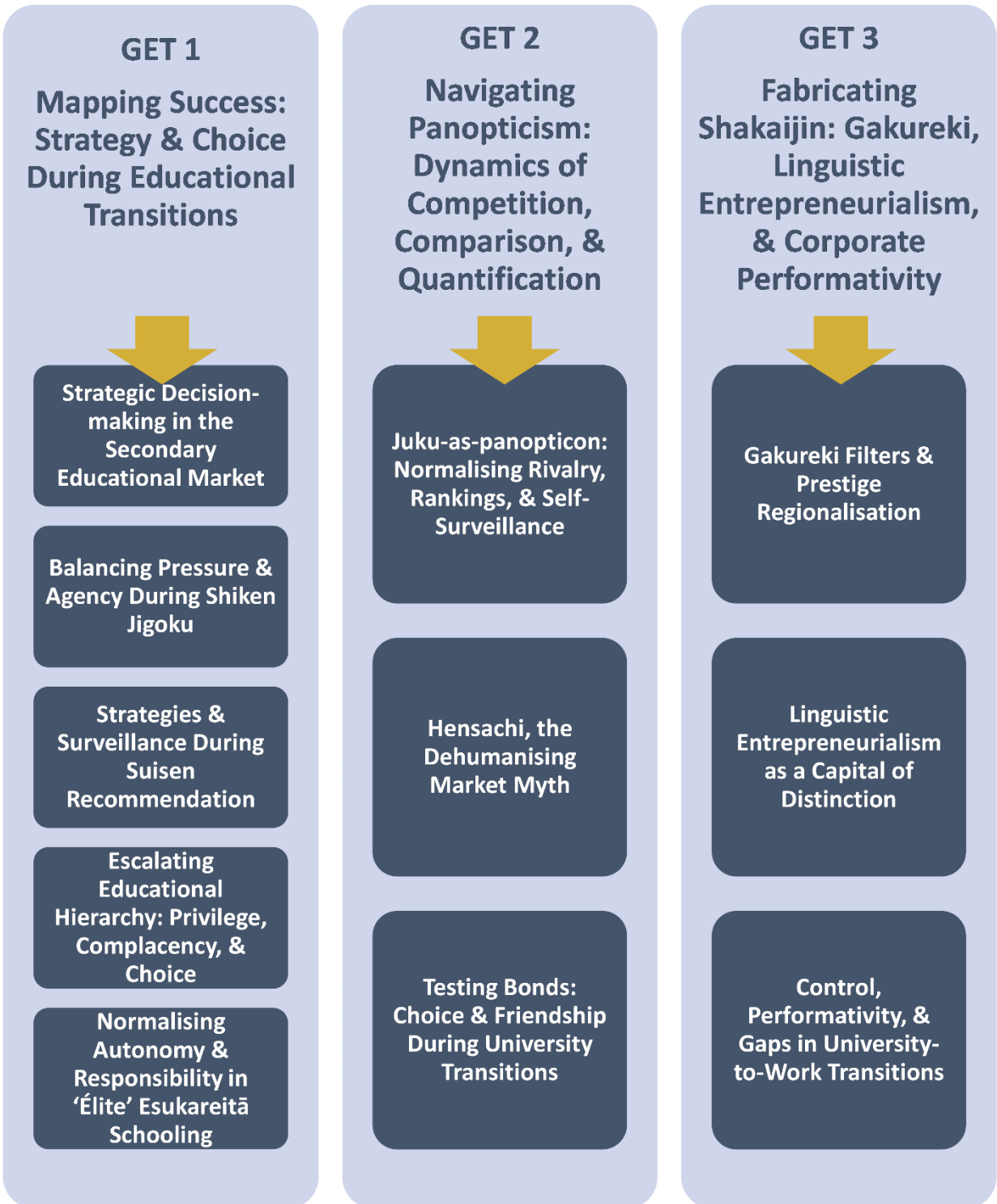
This chapter disclosed the personal, ontological, epistemological, conceptual, and methodological foundations of this research project. Considering the above question, I adopted a critical realist stance to conduct IPA within the scope of governmentality. Seeking to comprehend entrepreneurial subjectivity, semi-structured interviewing provided accounts of Japan’s enterprise society. Here, I placed respondents at the heart of my research, honouring their perceptions and experiences while recognising that phenomenological meaning-making remains fluid and intricate. The steps to transcribe and analyse each ‘semantic record’ were then disclosed. Finally, ethical and quality control criteria followed established techniques for ensuring ethical beneficence, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bates, 2004). Having outlined this study’s methodological basis, I now address its findings.

RESULTS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents findings related to my research question, design and the phenomenological analysis of meaning-making. IPA research is not prescriptive, “reflect[ing] process rather than outcome” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 41). Consequently, I provide explored learner testimony and interpreted meaning within the scope of—but not being limited by—governmentality. Given IPA’s in-depth and discursive nature, Smith et al. (2022, p. 110) suggest researchers provide visual representations of their study’s superordinate and sub-themes. To aid clarity, Figure 12 connects sub-themes to their overarching GETs, presenting their logical flow relating to group-level testimony. As noted by VanScoy and Evenstad (2015), IPA encourages adaptability when presenting results, highlighting that “narratives will vary depending on the researcher and the data collected” (p. 351); this flexibility is rooted in IPA’s commitment to capturing the richness and depth of shared meaning across testimonies (Smith et al., 2022). With thematic variation in mind, I present a series of interconnected sub-themes highlighting the complexity and interrelatedness of participant experience, supporting each sub-theme with evidence from as many participants as possible. Additionally, I engage findings with Foucauldian literature to attempt a thorough analysis and interpretation. In doing so, I seek to ‘lay the breadcrumbs’ for what is, I hope, a nuanced discussion of these findings. Thus, while this chapter describes and thematically analyses experiences of governmentality, the implications and significance of these themes for the ‘bigger picture’—Japanese society—will be addressed in the discussion chapter.

Figure 12. Visualisation of this study’s super and subordinate themes.



GET 1: Mapping Success: Strategy & Choice During Educational Transitions

Through five sub-themes (1A-E), GET 1 explores Japan's nested system of educational transitions, unveiling the strategic decision-making, pressures, surveillance mechanisms, and learning experiences shaping entrepreneurial projects. Against NPM-derived quasi-marketisation, testimonies highlight a dichotomy between public and private education, with private schools strategically tailoring curricula to gain a competitive edge (1A). Test culture, exemplified by 'exam hell', *shiken jigoku*, reveals the toll of quantifiability and imposed participation (1B). The *suisen* 'recommendation system', meanwhile, emerges as a strategic avenue for the enterprising to circumvent said tests, showcasing a panoptic environment where students mould their conduct to align with disciplinary institutions (1C). Additionally, the rising hierarchy of 'escalator schools' reflects neoliberal marketisation, creating disparities in opportunities and fostering complacency among privileged students (1D). Finally, normalising autonomy and responsibility within 'élite' escalator schooling shapes graduates for competitive educational and vocational landscapes (1E). In sum, this GET provides a nuanced understanding of how *homo aeconomicus* navigate Japan's educational landscape, internalise societal norms, and pursue academic success within NPM.

Sub-theme 1A: Strategic Decision-making in the Secondary Educational Market

This sub-theme examines how students 'map success' by tactically selecting the secondary schools best placed to enhance their prospects for entering 'élite' HE, revealing the interplay between individual agency and the systemic influences shaping educational outcomes. Here, it becomes apparent that participants exhibit acute tactical awareness of the intra-and-inter-school relationships supporting entry to Western University and the private, value-added options facilitating said transitions. Indeed, the distinction between public and private schooling is crucial, with several participants highlighting the competitive disadvantage of public study. Elisa, for example, notes, "*The public school doesn't really have, like... special point... rather than private school*" (p. 24), a notion supported by Dream, who states, "*Public high schools are kind of limited, ahh... compared to private schools, because private schools do whatever they want.*" (p. 20). Naturally, governmentality comes into play here, highlighting the perceived power dynamics inherent to the educational system, wherein private schools, in offering advantageous curricula and value-added options, exercise panoptic coercion, influencing students' strategic decisions and, in turn, entrepreneurial subjectivities (Foucault, 1995; Kelly, 2006). More pointedly, these statements shed light on the influence of NPM on Japan's broader educational ecology. Through quasi-marketisation, private schools distinguish themselves via tailored educational experiences, forging a competitive advantage over their public counterparts by providing 'special' value-added options.

Through the market's 'invisible hand', private schools structure their curricula to prioritise subjects perceived as distinctive or valuable: "*The teachers were particularly different from the public teachers. Because their class was kind of unique, in a way*" (Dream, p. 46). In contrast, public schools face a reduction in autonomy, which limits their capacity to respond to the competitive needs of students. Taiki, who studied in both public and private settings, differentiates private education on account of his exposure to native English-speaking faculty: "*Because, you know, native teachers don't teach English [in public schools]. But, you know, in private schools, there are native teachers, so they can, you know, the students can learn proper English*" (p. 32).

Dream, too, emphasises that “my [private] high school provided a lot of, you know, the opportunity to improve your English” (p. 20). Since English remains crucial to TGUP reform and Japan’s vision for human capital (Smith, 2021), private schools emphasising English present rational pathways for *seinen*²⁸ to secure responsible *shakaijin*²⁹ status. More interesting is tactical awareness of intra and inter-school relations, most notably the non-traditional *suisen* and *esukareitā gakkō* systems. By way of reminder, the former involves students securing recommendation letters from school faculty to circumvent university entrance exams, while the latter denotes educational corporations that allow learners to cross grades and institutions without testing. Accordingly, participants transitioned to Western-U via four distinct strategies, with only one, Dream, subjected to Japan’s hyper-competitive ‘exam hell’.

Hana first targeted Western University upon discovering the *suisen* recommendation method: “15 or 16. Ahh, I knew that there was a system of recommendation. And the only way to go to a better university was recommendation (laughs). Yeah, so I was... yeah, the only choice was Western University” (p. 51). The explicit governmentality of *suisen* and *esukareitā* transitions will be expanded upon in sub-themes 1C-1E; for now, one should recognise the strategic awareness exhibited by Hana—she not only viewed Western University as the “only” choice but, in tactically and agentively exploiting *suisen*, adapted to external market conditions. This form of savvy consumerism is mirrored in Kaori’s response, who conceded that her school’s *suisen* relationship with WU provided the ultimate motivation for her choice to attend the former: “Yeah ... because last, ah... *gakureki is daigaku*³⁰, so...” (pp. 36-37), further highlighting³⁰ the criticality of the school-to-work transition. With regards to the ‘escalator’ system, meanwhile, Kenji admits, “If I got accepted for the high school, in Western International HS, then that’s Western-U Group. So... not everyone, but, basically, without having a... difficult exam... I can just enter Western-U” (p. 24). Yuuki, too, highlights the competitive advantage gained from ‘escalator’ study: “I wanted to get into Western-U, that was the... I don’t want to say easiest, but most accessible” (p. 11), while Yoshiko notes that secondary level *esukareitā* transitions are also guaranteed, irrespective of student performance: “I was at an escalator school. So, I already know, like, even if I get, like, a zero on that test, I can still be a high school student” (p. 71).

From a *homo oeconomicus* perspective, Hana, Kaori, Kenji, and Yuuki may be viewed as rational actors making strategic choices that maximise their economic utility, with the *suisen* and *esukareitā* systems enhancing their chances of transitioning to a prestigious university. Against this background, the capacity for neoliberalism to govern “at a distance” (Costas Batlle, 2017; Rose, 2000) becomes manifest. In each case, the disciplinary power of Japan’s NPM-derived education system guided learners to specific educational profiles not via coercive subjugation but through relative access to ‘élite’ HE and, potentially, choice employment beyond it (Ross, 2008). Here, the *suisen* and *esukareitā* systems present rational and responsible pathways for savvy learners to enact idealised visions of future selves. Through tactical exploitation of intra and inter-school relations, the neoliberal ethea of efficiency, competition, and outcome measurement embed, aligning participants with NPM ideals as they seek to position themselves strategically to enhance their

²⁸ Japanese social adolescents.

²⁹ Japanese social/working adults.

³⁰ Approximate translation: “the last credential is the university degree”.

entrepreneurial projects. Moreover, Kenji's reference to WIS³¹ as part of the “*Western-U Group*” emphasises his understanding of educational corporatisation, highlighting the market dynamics guiding student choice.

Sub-theme 1B: Balancing Pressure & Agency During Shiken Jigoku

Following the purpose of GET 1, this sub-theme underscores how the navigation and *attempted* circumvention of ‘exam hell’, underscored by limited choice and enforced pathways, reflects the broader pressures and sometimes contradictory discipline upholding exam-based HS-to-college transitions. As the only *shiken jigoku* transitioner, sub-theme 1B draws heavily, but not exclusively, on the experiences of Dream. In doing so, the impact of examination culture and disciplinary force on subjectivities and struggles for agency within a system that prioritises intense competition, conformity, and institutional prestige reveal themselves. While one standardised testing transitioner may seem low given the Japanese-Confucian tradition of “meritocratic entrance examinations” (Fujita, 2000, p. 43), Kaori (p. 69) and Yoshiko (p. 76) substantiate the low number of exam-based transitions to Western University’s International Studies Department, both placing the number at 20%. While Dream’s experiences scaffold most of this sub-theme, *suisen* and *esukareitā gakkō* students’ testimonies provide valuable understandings of test culture. Kenji, Sachiko, and Yoshiko, for instance, expressed sympathy for exam takers, describing the pressures and sacrifices associated with standardised testing regimes:

“I feel sorry for them, for studying a lot ... Like... they study only for the exam, not for themselves.” (Kenji, p. 15).

“I mean, it would have been rough ... I don’t ever want to think about (laughs) how much pressure there were, like... under.” (Sachiko, pp. 26-27).

“They need so much preparation for examinations during their high school and junior high school. So, they’re... they need to, like, give up some memories, and they need to study.” (Yoshiko, p. 33).

The compassion here suggests recognition of corrosive hyper-competition and quantifiability. While MEXT’s pivot to individualism (Bourdieu, 1998) encourages narrow self-interest, it is encouraging to witness such empathy. However, in doing so, it *also* highlights participants as ‘active agents’—subjects cognisant of NPM’s human toll when agentively navigating (and seeking success within) the neoliberal structures governing them. The emphasis on studying solely for exams rather than for personal growth, meanwhile, highlights the instrumentalisation of education as students transition into tools of economic productivity (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020), or *homo oeconomicus*, and, for that matter, the futility of test-based learning for long-term development:

³¹ Western International School.

“So, they spent a lot of time, and they put in a lot of effort, but... I don’t think they get a lot of benefit from it.” (Kenji, p. 16).

“But, for Japanese students, they study only for exams. So, after the exams, they forgot everything ... iminai [pointless].” (Hana, p. 37).

These testimonies hint at normalisation, where individuals are conditioned to prioritise neoliberal rationalities, including quantifiable success, at the expense of personal growth. Through this technology of the self, “docile bodies” actively construct their entrepreneurial subjectivities within the capitalist framework (Foucault, 1995). The transient retention of knowledge post-exams, meanwhile, internalises education as a means to an end—or “performance of exchange relations” (Kelly, 2006, p. 29)—rather than an intrinsic pursuit of personal growth. While these experiences illustrate broader perceptions of testing culture, what of the participant subjected to entrance examinations? Given the pressure laid out here, Dream engaged in *shiken jigoku* unwillingly:

“My high school didn’t give me the chance to take a recommendation. Because ahh... the class I was in was kind of like the advanced class...” (Dream, p. 24).

“So, they can’t take the chance to use recommendation, but the teachers always said, you know, ‘you don’t need to’ or, like, ‘you can’t do that because every other class would take that.’ So, I was, so... kind of forced to do entrance exams.” (Dream, p. 24).

This restriction implies governmentality as established norms dictate who is deemed ‘worthy’ of recommendation. Here, the “*advanced class*” becomes a microcosm of governance through disciplinary force (Foucault, 1995). By design or default, the system channelled Dream into a specific pathway based on perceived abilities, reinforcing a hierarchical structure predetermining success and failure. Dream’s exclusion from recommendation illustrates how schools perpetuate norms, aiding or constraining the possibilities for individual advancement. Indeed, while the underachievement and non-accountability for low academic performance described here may appear, on the surface, antithetical to entrepreneurial selfhood, it may also be interpreted as disciplining conformity to *wa*, Japanese social harmony and group cohesion, wherein it is expected that limited *suisen* recommendations are reserved for less-able students with diminished chances of passing university entrance exams:

“It’s kind of the traditional way. Like, our class is always forced to the... do the, ahh, examination, entrance examination. Because, if we do... don’t do that, umm... every other class is, like, the... ahh, ‘why don’t you take it because you’re in the smart class?’” (Dream, pp. 38-39).

“So, my teachers... my high school teacher always told me the, ahh... ‘lower the place... your level... for, like, so... you don’t have to fail your exam.’” (Dream, p. 36).

In prioritising institutional stability and ease of transitions over merit, Dream’s school acts as a panoptic force, whereby internalised surveillance ensures self-regulation. Aware of the potential repercussions of students failing to transition to HE, teachers engage in risk-aversion, curtailing actions that might threaten the institution’s smooth operation and prestige. By denying Dream *suisen* in favour of lower-achieving students, her teachers sought to minimise risk but, by simultaneously encouraging her to ‘lower her level’, attempted to steer Dream towards lower-ranked HEIs rather than risk her failing the entrance exams of prestigious universities and negatively impact the high school’s reputation. Dream (p. 39) agreed that her school enacted this policy due to its corporate status (“*Because it’s a private school ... it’s kind of a company [laughs]*”). Despite being encouraged to lower her level to secure HE, Dream was constantly reminded of the importance of HEI prestige by the very teachers who forced her into *shiken jigoku*:

“Even during class, every teacher says, ‘you have to remember this stuff, because you gotta go to the better universities’ ... that was kind of... umm, frustrating to hear.” (Dream, p. 39).

Again, Dream’s experiences reflect internalised disciplinary power where teachers, functioning as ‘active agents’ of governmentality, contribute to subjectivity by normalising the purpose of education to enter “*better universities*”. Dream’s awareness of—and frustration at—the contradictory actions of her teachers nevertheless suggest resistance to the disciplinary forces aiming to regulate her conduct (McKee, 2009), prompting an internal “management of possibilities” (Foucault, 2003, p. 138). Her emotional response may be interpreted as a struggle against the prescribed path dictated by the institution; yet, Dream’s (p. 25) desire for agency and autonomy in shaping her educational journey (“*I am responsible for my future*”) evidences her willingness to engage in responsabilisation as self-care (Foucault, 2005).

Sub-theme 1C: Strategies & Surveillance During Suisen Recommendation

While sub-theme 1B focuses on exam-based transitions, examining the pressures and disciplinary forces associated with standardised testing, 1C explores recommendation-based transitions, revealing the navigation strategies and surveillance mechanisms compelling learners to conform to institutional expectations. Thus, consistent with the broader purpose of this GET, sub-theme 1C underscores *suisen* as a strategic yet sometimes constrained pathway. Indeed, delving into the panoptic influence of *suisen* illuminates the internalisation and, in turn, *acceptance* of the disciplinary forces shaping successful recommendations. Given the competitive advantage gained from *suisen*, it is of little surprise that four of this study’s nine participants exploited the system to gain admission to WU. So widespread is this practice that Kaori estimated the number of

recommendations in her grade to be “70%, maybe ... and 20% were test-takers, and 10% I’m not sure” (p. 69). One must recognise, however, that numbers vary by institution based on cohort size, public or private status, and location.

Indeed, it bears repeating that Nakamura (2011) estimated *suisen* transitions to be 35.4% in 2010—a sizeable number given Japan’s allegedly “meritocratic” exam culture (Fujita, 2000). Nevertheless, while secondary institutions may be afforded a certain degree of leeway in terms of the overall number of recommendations, Nakamura (2011, p. 135) affirms that highly-competitive private HEIs—those with a *hensachi*³² of 65-69, or “roughly the top 6.6-2.8% of the rank” (Matsuoka, 2013, p. 54)—admit approximately 21% of their annual intake through *suisen*. As previously stated, WU recorded a *hensachi* of 66 in 2023 (Toshin, 2023), placing it firmly within this range. Both Elisa (p. 46), “It’s like just for three or four for each university. So just one space for me”, and Hana (p. 85), “Yeah, about 12 people ... out of 80”, confirm limited recommendation places for their cohorts, while Yoshiko (p. 30) reported concern for her *suisen* application given the absence of a pre-existing relationship between WU and her school (“I don’t think they have a relationship ... But my type of exam needs a recommendation!”).

Elisa (p. 27), too, described her anxiety and ultimate relief upon gaining admission to Western-U: “I thought I... I will fail this university. Just the... you know, *kinen juken*³³... But, I... unexpectedly, I passed this school, and I was like ‘huhhh’ [gleeful shocked noise]”. Elisa’s experience demonstrates the anxiety-engendering-truth of Japan’s enterprise society, wherein limited *suisen* function as surveillance mechanisms. Here, the anxiety of not being recommended serves as a panoptic-disciplinary force, steering learners to self-govern (Rose, 1996) or *normalise* their conduct, aligning with the neoliberal dogma that one’s attributes and efforts drive success (Kelly, 2006). Highlighting the importance of self-esteem in this process, Dream (p. 40) notes, “If you want to do recommendation, umm... the students must be always good girl or good boy”, while Hana (p. 85) actively sought leadership roles in order to secure her recommendation (“Oh, yeah, behaviour is really important. So, I joined the school council”), maintaining a sense of responsibility for her *suisen* transition by engaging in conduct viewed as worthwhile or productive. Similarly, Kaori (p. 70) demonstrates an entrepreneurial subjectivity by embodying the behaviours requisite to neoliberal productivity:

“I really care about it... I’m never absent.... for three years for recommendation, and also, I joined some club or leader... volunteering and speaking ... it leads to recommendations, so everyone focuses on that.”

Consolidating the above, emphasis on attendance, participating in clubs, leadership roles, volunteering, and speaking activities exemplify panoptic surveillance. Seeking out such activities for *suisen*, Dream, Hana, and Kaori embody the evaluative gaze of the school, which compels

³² The standard deviation score used to filter students into appropriate universities. 50 is the average.

³³ An idiom meaning taking an exam with little chance of passing it.

them to ‘rationally’ maintain a disciplined and calculative presence throughout their schooling. Indeed, given *kejime*’s centrality in shaping Japanese youths to accept responsibility for ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as part of a dutiful persona (Fu, 2016), pursuing recommendations is a manifestation of *kejime* aligned with *homo oeconomicus*. Sachiko (p. 15) typifies this process, viewing *kejime* as an autonomous shift toward responsabilisation: “*I mean, it’s your life. So, you got to choose, like, it’s you that you, like, choose that line. So, it depends on how you want to become in the future*”. As stated previously, however, *kejime* remains a fluid and intricate balancing act between one’s authentic self and a potentially inauthentic front (Fu, 2016):

“Because many people didn’t take exams to go into college, they always tried to get the recommendation system. So, their behaviour only in front of the teacher was really good. Because it’s... you know, like, evaluated through those three years, not before... just before the exam.” (Yoshiko, p. 74).

Again, Yoshiko’s experiences speak to the calculative nature of *homo oeconomicus*, wherein reputation and conformity play crucial roles in determining one’s personal ‘brand’. Here, education is an investment—an entrepreneurial venture—with students aiming to maximise their returns (recommendations) by autonomously regulating behaviour to conform to the evaluative criteria set by the system. The result is an economic agent that is at once “docile” and “calculable” in their actions (Foucault, 1995). Indeed, so effective is panoptic surveillance that it followed Hana and Kaori into their university studies. When asked who she felt responsible towards in terms of her education, Hana (p. 22) responded, “*For myself and for my high school*”, elaborating:

“Yeah, because I entered university by recommendation. So, if my grade... was... is bad, the recommendations [for future applicants] will be cut ... my grades are sent to my high school.” (Hana, pp. 22-23).

Kaori (p. 69), too, notes, “*Oh, they can see the... yeah, our school, too ... yeah, like, show, like, can see... what my score is*”. These experiences represent surveillance in its most explicit form. Hana and Kaori remain aware that academic performance directly affects not only their standing but also the reputation of their schools and the *suisen* opportunities afforded to others: “*If I get bad grades, I think they will not, like... they [other students] will not be allowed to submit*” (Hana, p. 85). Here, recommendations open learners to the normalising effect of shame, reshaping conduct as an academic subjectivity whereby quantifiable metrics and a desire to maintain harmony dictate self-worth. Accordingly, the fear of repercussions for poor academic performance demonstrates an internalisation and *normalisation* of market principles, with Kaori and Hana’s “*common*” experiences suggesting that surveillance internalises as a tool for regulating behaviour and conforming to the neoliberal ethos of individual effort begetting success:

“I think it’s a common thing ... it’s... really pressure. I feel pressure. But I think it’s good for me because if I didn’t have any pressure I wouldn’t study (laughs).” (Hana, p. 84).

In determining pressure as necessary for study, Hana aligns her “fields of possibilities” (Raaper, 2020, p. 152) with the expectations set by disciplinary institutions and a broader governmentality valuing self-regulation and self-improvement (McKee, 2009). There is consistency between this process and Hana’s (p. 18) interpretation of *kejime* as “*Separate... the work or working and... like, fun*”, a reading shared by Sachiko (p. 14): “*When you have fun, you have fun, but when you have to get serious, you get, like, serious*”, denoting the influence of enduring social norms on responsabilisation. Moreover, it evidences the panoptic nature of *kejime*, where *seinen* discipline themselves to fit societal expectations under the gaze of authority. The risk here is that such practice normalises to the point of docility. Students may interpret themselves as free to rationally align their *kejime*—or “*choose that line*” (Sachiko, p. 15); yet, acceptance of such mechanisms within education *also* reflects the pervasive nature of surveillance in Japanese society, whereby monitoring ingrains in various aspects of life. Indeed, in stating, “*Because they know that... they can do anything ... (laughs) It’s strange, but I don’t care*” when referring to inter-school grade-sharing, Kaori (p. 69) pragmatically adapts (or *accepts reality* from the Beckerian perspective) to “systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment” (Foucault, 2008, p. 270). In the pursuit of academic success and access to ‘élite’ HE, she is willing to accept that agents of disciplinary institutions (school administration) “*can do anything*”, further highlighting the paradox inherent to the entrepreneurial project: you may be ‘free’ to adapt to the system, but you remain eminently governable when doing so.

Sub-theme 1D: Escalating Educational Hierarchy: Privilege, Complacency & Choice

While sub-theme 1C focuses on the *suisen* recommendation system and how it disciplines self-regulation through internal and external surveillance, 1D reveals that guaranteed progression via *esukareitā gakkō* engenders privilege. In doing so, however, this sub-theme also contends that transitions from prestigious schools to HEIs operating under a single corporate structure foster complacency and reinforce the neoliberal ideal of efficiency by disciplining acceptance of a predetermined educational trajectory. As previously detailed, *esukareitā gakkō* provide a means of circumventing Japan’s high-stakes entrance examinations (Green, 2000; Timsit, 2018). Once a tool for low-level schools to bolster flagging recruitment numbers (Datta, 1992), households are increasingly drawn to ‘escalator schools’ “because they are seen to give privileged access to good universities” (Green, 2000, p. 431). Western-U maintains several *esukareitā gakkō*, with four of this study’s participants transitioning from associated schools. While Kenji, Sachiko, and Yuuki attended WIS, Taki studied at WSHS³⁴, a secondary school sharing the university’s campus.

³⁴ Western Senior High School.

Following information found on the school’s website, tuition fees at this institution amount to ¥915,000 (US\$6,300³⁵) per annum, plus a ¥200,000 (US\$1,400) “entrance fee”, among other expenses (Western Senior High School, 2024). WIS, meanwhile, charges ¥1,240,000 (US\$8,500) per annum for tuition and “educational enhanced expenses”, plus ¥102,000 (US\$700) for “miscellaneous expenses”, and a ¥300,000 (US\$2,000) “enrolment fee”, for a total of ¥1,642,000 (US\$11,300) initial outlay, ¥1,342,000 (US\$9,200) per annum thereafter (Western International School of Western University, 2023). Thus, Western University’s *esukareitā gakkō* system as a manifestation of NPM-derived open marketisation reveals contact points between credentialism and social inequity, with students from privileged backgrounds afforded greater opportunities for accumulating the educational backgrounds mediating social mobility (Dubin, 2023). Taiki (p. 30) notes, “*Most people can’t take the system because some families don’t have enough money to do that. So, I think it’s not fair*”. Naturally, Taiki’s observation aligns with sustained critiques of neoliberalism, where market values potentially intensify educational disparity (Smith, 2022a, 2022b) but, in normalising ‘escalator’ transitions as guaranteed, *also* foster complacent attitudes towards academic achievement:

“People who go to private school when they are elementary school students or junior high school... most people don’t care about the test grades because they don’t need to get a high score to go to high school or university.” (Taiki, p. 31).

“I don’t like the system, actually. Because... some students entered this university ... you know, with less skills. Some know that Western is a very good, ahhh... university, but some of them... especially Western Elementary School. You know, it’s an escalator?” (Elisa, p. 7).

“I mean by seeing Western-U students; escalator students are less serious... than the students who needed to take the exams ... their logical thinking is not really good.” (Yoshiko, p. 67).

Such testimony highlights the precarity of schools commodifying hierarchical progression through education. Considering complacency as a focal point, these statements raise questions about meritocracy. *Esukareitā* progression leads to apathy in the privileged while (further) disadvantaging motivated learners lacking the means for tuition. More pointedly, these experiences lend credence to claims that GPA and learning content have little bearing on one’s capacity to secure employment, providing one holds the requisite credentials to navigate a company’s *gakureki filter* (Kawanishi, 2020; Toyokawa, 2018; Yano, 2013). Looking beyond socio-economic inequity, however, the contractual implication born by *esukareitā* investment aligns choice with economic rationality (Foucault, 2008), guiding *homo œconomicus* through a predetermined pathway and, in turn, expected career outcomes. Thus, while the privilege gained from *esukareitā* transitions may, on the surface, undermine the entrepreneurial drive to excel, it also serves to discipline individuals

³⁵ Approximate rates of conversion correct as of January 2024.

to conform to market demands for credentialed—if not knowledgeable (Yano, 2013)—graduates. Indeed, as highlighted by Yoshiko, the normalisation of assured progression without significant effort may contribute to a lack of “*logical thinking*”, a belief shared by Sachiko (p. 59):

“I think it helps a lot of people. But at the same time, it kind of like, not make us think about our future because, like, we know, oh, we can go to Western-U. We don’t have to try that hard.”

“But when you actually get into uni, and you see those people go into like, higher universities, or, like, who went abroad. I was, like, ‘Oh, maybe I should have thought about it... more.’”

As demonstrated here, the sense of security gained from assured transitions between schools operating under a single corporate structure diminishes motivation to explore alternative paths, with overreliance on a predetermined outcome hindering the development of a more ambitious mindset: “*Like, if you don’t really know what you want to do, if you don’t really have your strong opinion, they just, like... [Interviewer: go to Western-U?] yeah.*” (Sachiko, p. 13). Yet, the “*100% successful*” (Yuuki, p. 44) path afforded to *esukareitā* students ensures compliance through both carrot and stick:

“I chose this uni because it was, like, connected, and I could just go there smoothly. So, if I think about it, I did it. I didn’t really have the choice to go any other, like, places...” (Sachiko, p. 13).

“The thing about me applying to Western-U is, in WIS, if you choose to apply to Western-U, you can’t choose any other schools.” (Yuuki, p. 44).

“The application for Western-U, when you go to WIS, is so early on. But it’s, like... I guess you could technically apply to other schools, but you’d be wasting a lot of money and time, so...” (Yuuki, p. 65).

“No. I mean, that was impossible ... They don’t want you to use Western-U as a back-up. That’s why ... they don’t let us... you know, apply for other universities if I apply for Western-U.” (Kenji, p. 26).

Here, a contrived early application process normalises a predetermined path, where disciplinary institutions govern the range of acceptable choices and the timing of decisions (Foucault, 2005). As exemplified by Yuuki, *esukareitā* students, while ostensibly ‘free’, internalise the neoliberal rationale of choice-based efficiency (Peck et al., 2018) as deviating from the prescribed path is unproductive and burdensome. The emphasis on a smooth transition, early applications, and the discouragement of applying to multiple universities reflects a rational calculation based on

perceived economic efficiency. In turn, the Western University Group's corporate rules internalise as students adapt their entrepreneurial projects to align with enforced constraints: "*Like, everyone's, like, 'Okay, I mean, they're happy with it.'*" (Sachiko, p. 13). Lack of choice becomes the 'norm', leading students to internalise constraint as an inherent feature of the application process. The "*impossibility*" of using Western-U as a "*back-up*", as noted by Kenji (p. 26), further underscores disciplinary control. This prohibition aligns with the school's desire to project an 'élite' image and reputation, bolstering its standing in the academic community by transitioning graduates to a prestigious HEI and doubtlessly attracting high-achieving students for future intakes. Despite Sachiko (p. 27) noting, "*If I think about it now, no-one failed (laughs)*", this mechanism of constraint may contribute to exclusionary practices. Learners who, for various reasons, cannot or choose not to adhere to the early deadline might be deemed undesirable or outside the 'norm' of neoliberal productivity, thereby reinforcing a particular institutional culture by selecting 'strong' students who conform to specific criteria and filtering the 'weak' into lower-ranked HEIs:

"If I fail, then I... could apply for other universities, because the application for Western-U in my high school was... really early, like... in the first semester of the 12th grade... and we applied, and we will get resolved. Then, after that, we can... if we fail, we can look for other universities." (Kenji, p. 57).

Sub-theme 1E: Normalising Autonomy & Responsibility in 'Élite' Esukareitā Schooling

This sub-theme's examination of 'escalator' transitions highlights how privileged yet predetermined educational trajectories reinforce neoliberal market principles, aligning with GET 1 by demonstrating how strategic decision-making and imposed institutional paths shape learner conduct. So far, this GET depicts a nested terrain of private secondary-to-tertiary education transitions. As noted in sub-theme 1B, while few *seinen*, whether through choice or coercion, are subjected to 'exam hell', a more significant number circumvent high-pressure testing via recommendations (1C). Given Western-U's wealth, prestige, and corporate reach, additional doors open to those households willing and, more pointedly, *able* to invest in *esukareitā* transitions between its institutions. As highlighted in the disparity between WSHS' ¥915,000 (US\$6,300) and WIS' "*very expensive*" (Yuuki, p. 7) ¥1,320,000 (US\$9,200) tuition cost per annum, however, open marketisation in education reinforces stratification, catering to different segments of the population based on prestige and exclusivity. Given the notable price difference between two HSs owned by the same corporation, which, in effect, offer the same "*free pass*" (Yuuki, p. 6) to the same 'élite' university, what does WIS offer to justify a tuition increase of 46.7% annually?

Given the centrality of globalisation reform to TGUP and, in turn, human capital (Amano, 2014; Smith & Samuel, 2024), it is of little surprise that international schooling emerges as a crucible for "the production of nobility" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 73). Through NPM's 'invisible hand', increased efficiency through competition induces private schools to market value-added options attracting entrepreneurial and *wealthy* "embedded choosers" seeking "the 'right' course and the 'right' institution" (Ball et al., 2002, p. 342) based on their respective needs. Looking beyond the

international exposure and English-language immersion commonly associated with such schooling (Tanaka & Kutsuki, 2018), the curriculum offered by WIS encourages learners to be self-sufficient and accountable for their actions. As such, this sub-theme recounts how, by promoting market-oriented conduct among students, WIS systematically responsabilises *homo æconomicus* through choice, self-discipline, and skill development. Thus, while sub-theme 1D highlights ‘escalator schools’ external discipline through systemic pathways, 1E reveals that costlier variants stimulate internal discipline by fostering autonomy and accountability:

“So, there were not many restrictions... or mandatory classes ... I had to take care of myself. Like, I have to plan everything by myself. And the high school office told me they’re not gonna be telling me anything. So even if I’m doing something wrong, they are not going to tell me. Maybe they will... send an email or something when it’s a serious problem... They just told me they’re not gonna be looking after students.” (Kenji, p. 58)

“I think WIS has, like, a whole system that’s kind of like that because it’s... they really tried to make classes and, like, course... registrations very college-like, you can choose everything. It’s a credit system. And if you mess up, you mess up. You can’t graduate, stuff like that.” (Yuuki, p. 65).

“So, like, teachers didn’t really tell us what to do or what not to do? Or, like, it was all about, ‘Okay, okay. You can do anything you want. But it’s your responsibility if something happens’ ... we had to learn that... figure it out for yourself.” (Sachiko, p. 63).

These testimonies highlight WIS’ inflexions with governmentality from several perspectives. Following the neoliberal valorisation of choice, the flexible course selection and lack of faculty guidance subtly reflect panopticism, where students are granted autonomy. However, while these quotes describe a system lacking explicit restrictions, students remain aware of the consequences if they deviate from expected norms. An absence of strict regulations and hierarchy emphasises self-discipline and self-regulation by responsabilising choice—and the consequences of those choices. In a sense, learners are constantly under the gaze of their actions, with *shame* an ever-present enforcement mechanism (Foucault, 1995). In such an environment, is learner autonomy authentic? Additionally, in placing responsibility for planning, decision-making, and navigating education on students, WIS’ organisational structure resonates with neoliberal character-building, wherein *homo æconomicus* are self-sufficient and accountable. The unrestrictive, college-like credit system described by Kenji and Yuuki further normalises “care for the self” (Foucault, 2005) through responsabilisation. Here, *seinen* are conditioned by a system resembling HE in which they are accountable for their decisions. In this regard, the absence of strict rules and the emphasis on self-regulation contribute to developing self-esteem through ownership of choice, reflecting Foucault’s (1995) belief that disciplinary power operates through subtle and diffuse mechanisms inducing productivity. Indeed, this is further reinforced by WIS’ *five respects*:

“I mean, we didn’t really have rules, like school rules. We only had five respects, like, that we have to follow. And they were respect for yourself, respect for your others... for others, respect for the education, for the environment, and for the leadership.” (Sachiko, p. 33)

Emphasising ambiguous core values rather than prescriptive rules encourages self-regulation through a “flexible discourse of power” (Lichenstein, 2021, p. 300). The vagueness of these ‘respects’, whereby students “*had to, like, choose what was good and what was bad*” (Sachiko, p. 33), allows for broad interpretation, giving youths the malleability to discern and adapt their values across various encounters. Thus, by influencing learners at a deeper, more intrinsic level, power manifests through the subtle shaping of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. By emphasising individual betterment, one may draw parallels between this process and Eagleton-Pierce’s (2016) description of melioristic character-building, whereby *homo æconomicus* actively shape their destinies through personal responsibility and self-improvement. While the governmentality described thus far focuses on implicit self-discipline, WIS also embeds skills and outlooks explicit to neoliberal subjectivity:

“The bell, but we didn’t have this, so we had to look at the clock even during, like, lunchtime and stuff. And if you were like three minutes late, you were late. It’s your responsibility that you weren’t looking at your clock, but I think that taught us... a lot, like... be on time (laughs).” (Sachiko, pp. 63-64).

“So, you really get to, like, hone your skills. And there’s a lot of presentations, lots of, you know, instances where you have to, like, public speaking. And, so, I feel like in college and in shakaijin life, that’s really something you need.” (Yuuki, p. 41).

While the absence of bells further normalises the belief that *seinen* are responsible for their conduct and must navigate the consequences of their choices, it also internalises the neoliberal demand that *shakaijin* be constantly productive, efficient, and time-conscious, normalising these competencies ahead of workplace transitions—training for future disciplinary institutions. Considering Yuuki’s testimony, focusing on presentation and public speaking prepares students as neoliberal subjects by embedding the “flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business” (Gershon, 2011, p. 537). Indeed, the explicit connection made by Yuuki between skills developed at WIS and their relevance to HE and “*shakaijin life*” highlights the school’s commitment to preparing students for future productivity, aligning with the neoliberal belief that education develops human capital that is not only academically proficient but equipped with the skills necessary for the vocational market. By conceptualising skills acquired during HS as relevant to navigating the competitive landscape (“*that’s really something you need*”), Yuuki (p. 41)

describes these capabilities as if they were assets within his entrepreneurial project while also demonstrating his awareness of *shūkatsu*'s³⁶ disciplinary power.

GET 1: Summary

Considering strategy and choice as starting points, what are GET 1's key takeaways? Sub-theme 1A delves into the decision-making processes used to navigate Japanese secondary education, highlighting how learners strategically leverage systems like *suisen* and *esukareitā* to maximise their chances of entering prestigious universities, thereby underscoring neoliberal governance's capacity to influence educational pathways subtly and without coercion (Foucault, 2015). The following sub-theme delves into the pressures and choices surrounding exam-based transitions, emphasising the institutional and societal disciplinary forces shaping these experiences. In 1C, the discussion shifts to recommendation-based transitions, revealing how learners navigate surveillance and conform to institutional expectations by internalising disciplinary force. The subsequent sub-theme reveals the privilege and complacency inherent to guaranteed transitions to prestigious HEIs, highlighting the societal implications of an escalating educational hierarchy. Finally, 1E explores the normalisation of autonomy and responsibility within 'élite' *esukareitā* schooling, showcasing how these systems reinforce neoliberal market principles and prepare students for employment. Hence, GET 1 illuminates the nuanced interplay between strategic decision-making, societal pressure, institutional surveillance, and privilege scaffolding HS-to-university transitions.

³⁶ 'job-hunting activities'.

GET 2: Navigating Panopticism: Dynamics of Competition, Comparison, & Quantification

While GET 1 calls attention to the strategic, often non-test-taking pathways called on by learners to gain access to Western-U, GET 2's three sub-themes (2A-C) highlight the panoptic gaze of academic competition that, in many ways, drives students to the savvy academic consumerism described in GET 1. Indeed, *Juku*, Japan's unregulated 'shadow' education institutions, normalise rivalry, rankings, and self-surveillance. Drawing on hierarchical quantifiability, including student league tables and seating arrangements, *juku* foster competitive accountability, reforging peer relationships as economic calculations (2A). Closely tied to *juku*, *hensachi*, a system filtering *seinen* into 'appropriately-levelled' schools and universities, emerges as a panoptic force, encouraging self-discipline and responsabilisation. Participants describe the system as dehumanising and dishonest, reflecting broader concerns for neoliberal transparency (2B). Finally, the bonds between choice, friendship, and university transitions are explored. The pressure to attend university becomes a mechanism of self-discipline, reinforcing credentialism. In doing so, the commodification of peer relationships in competitive academic settings, where success and failure are internalised and relationships are strained, reflects the neoliberal trend of evaluating human capital based on marketable skills and qualifications (2C). Thus, exploring *juku*, *hensachi*, and contingent friendships illuminates the complex dynamics undergirding competition, comparison, and quantification in Japanese education.

Sub-theme 2A: Juku-as-panopticon: Normalising Rivalry, Rankings, & Self-Surveillance

Having explored Japan's nested HS-to-university transitions in GET 1, it is time to address *juku*, unregulated 'shadow' education institutions providing supplementary tutoring. Accordingly, this sub-theme details how, as disciplinary institutions, *juku* instil self-surveillance among students, reinforcing neoliberal ideals by fostering a culture of quantifiable success and market-driven competitiveness. By way of reminder, *juku* are "part of a social fabric that has stressed diligence in learning" (Bray & Lykins, 2012, p. 38) to the effect that youths feel insecure when sitting exams without additional instruction (MEXT, 2008; Shintani, 2018). Indeed, while only one participant undertook 'exam hell' to enter Western-U, all students reported shadow education expenditure to ease JHS or HS transitions. Most participants reported starting *juku* during elementary and junior high school, with Kaori (p. 27): "*Juku is not cheap. It's very high. So, it's very expensive...*" and Elisa (p. 17) noting the expense attached to supplementary education: "*Yeah, it's kind of unfair. For, ahh... like, not rich family... to go to juku.*" Sachiko (p. 28), meanwhile, claimed "*if... your parents don't have enough money... and they can't afford juku or, like, good juku.*" as a disadvantage inherent to the system. Regardless, of those offering specific ages, Elisa (p. 14) began at age fifteen, Taiki (p. 23) at fourteen, Yuuki (p. 20) at thirteen, Dream (p. 27) and Yoshiko (p. 23) at twelve, and Kaori (p. 25) and Hana (p. 27) at eleven. From a Foucauldian (1995) perspective, *juku* are disciplinary institutions where entrepreneurial selfhood is normalised and disciplined via a panoptic gaze of rigorous study and quantifiability. Indeed, by fostering an intensely competitive environment, wherein everyone is "*Ahh! Kind of [a] rival.*" (Dream, p. 31), *juku* foster constant self-surveillance as learners compare themselves to peers:

“On the surface, we’d be saying, like, ‘Let’s work together and let’s both go to the same school.’ But deep down... I mean, one of us might get in, one of us might not, both of us might. So, yeah, deep down, there might have been ... I see everybody as... a potential rival, I guess.” (Yuuki, p. 61).

“Everyone in the juku is, like, a rival because they, you know, have a chance to go to the same high school. So, yeah, we had to compete with each other. Like, even the next guy... even the next rival who is sitting in the next chair. They, you know, he’s... competition... a competitor for me. So, I studied a lot. I tried to study hard as I can. So, I think it’s a great place to study.” (Taiki, p. 25).

“Especially when I don’t understand anything... what teachers were saying, but ... when everyone is understanding what the teacher is saying, then I feel, like... ‘why don’t I understand this?!’” (Kenji, p. 14).

“I think they motivated me because they studied really hard. So, I thought, ‘Oh, I will also study!’” (Hana, p. 31).

Here, participants showcase self-surveillance by internalising competition in peer relationships. Yuuki and Taiki’s belief that “*everyone*” is a potential rival and perception of classmates as opponents normalise the neoliberal ideal of competition and self-interest as driving success (Giroux, 2014; Peck et al., 2018). In Kenji and Hana’s testimony, the feeling of being observed and compared to others evidences itself in the struggles to understand content and ‘keep up’, normalising self-surveillance as learners compare themselves to peers within a hyper-competitive environment. Additionally, when asked if she would have felt more competitive if her *juku* peers had aimed for the same school, Yoshiko (p. 27) agreed, “*Yeah, I think so (laughs). Maybe I would work harder*”, reflecting how shared competition *responsibilises* academic excellence as self-discipline. Indeed, all testimonies reflect the technologisation of the self, including *normalisation*, wherein competition becomes a standard aspect of the academic experience, and deriving motivation and *self-esteem* from meeting the academic challenges of rivals. Moving toward the strategies used by *juku* to incite competition, ranked seating order, where students are placed relative to their test scores, reflects shame’s normalising effect:

“At juku... there are tables assigned. Like... in the classroom, there are, like... 20 people. And then, students need to... ahh, take a seat by the lower score ... And... every time (laughs) I... was in the... front row. So... it’s kind of pressure. Everybody thinks that if I’m... the front student. I’m not, you know... good at... a test.” (Elisa, p. 15).

“Yeah, they certainly have the seat system. Yeah, based on their ranking. I thought it was pretty stupid because, you know, it makes students really stressed out. If they had to sit back there, you know?” (Dream, p. 89).

Hana (p. 91), too, experienced this seating ranking system, noting that she “*always felt nervous*”. Here, the physical organisation of learners normalises classroom hierarchies based on academic ‘worth’ and the capacity to meet neoliberal expectations for quantifiable success (Ferlie, 2010). Consonant with *homo oeconomicus*, students perceive achievement in terms of performance and positioning within the ranking system. In sharing graded hierarchies openly, *juku* normalise success as determined by individual effort and the ability to best rivals: “*I feel pretty good. Because that makes me more motivated. So yeah, I was pretty happy with that system.*” (Taiki, p. 71). Surveillance through quantifiability does not end with seating order, however; *juku* normalise self-regulation by displaying posters containing student grades, with Taiki (p. 70) noting that he “*had to take exams every week... to find out... to find my position and my level*”:

“They have, like a... poster, which they, you know, put on the wall. And everyone can see. So yeah, it made the students pressured.” (Taiki, p. 72).

“Oh, that one, the graph on the wall. And, like, name and score, name, score, name, and then it was highest to the lowest ... [Interviewer: ‘How did that make you feel?’] Awful (laughs). Because even I got a good score... I need to act like feeling sorry for my friends, you know? And when I get a low score, I have to feel miserable.” (Yoshiko, pp. 81-82).

Foucault’s (1988a) technologies of the self are further evidenced in these experiences. Normalisation is evidenced by the weekly levelling tests pressuring students to conform to predetermined standards. Responsibilisation is seen in the emphasis on individual effort and competition, placing the onus on students to excel. The emotional impact of test scores influences self-esteem, shaping an ‘ethical’ subjectivity based on measurable performance. In feeling the need to “*act*” in a certain way, Yoshiko highlights the interplay between individual emotion and *kejime*’s cultural imperative for in-group harmony (Fu, 2016). Indeed, her experience reflects the amplification of neoliberal ideals through Japanese cultural values: through panoptic self-governance, students are academically responsible *for* their success and emotionally responsible *to* their peers. Yuuki’s connection between *juku* rankings and aggressive corporate practice, meanwhile, universalises the emotional burden born from neoliberal competition:

“I guess it’s to motivate you. But, at the same time, I guess it’s what Samsung does with its company. It’s like, ‘Hey, this guy has better numbers than you.’ And then, they go to the other guy and then say, ‘Hey, this guy is coming up against you,’ and then... kind of cause a fight.” (Yuuki, p. 68).

Yuuki’s reference to a “*fight*” implies that, as with neoliberalism more generally, quantifiability may exacerbate stress, rivalry, and negative emotions (Zeira, 2022). Additionally, comparisons to

Samsung highlight a neoliberal ethos where *homo oeconomicus* commodifies within market-like settings. Indeed, the comparison between *juku* and Samsung—a corporation described as “hierarchical” and “militant” (Son, 2022)—is fitting. Each exemplifies the neoliberal environment in which disciplinary measures ensure *homo oeconomicus* meet performance targets and conform to market norms. *Juku* students and Samsung employees engage in disciplinary practices, including intense workloads and long working hours (Entrich, 2018; Yamada, 2018), as a means of self-discipline and self-improvement in response to competitive flows in the market (Becker, 1976), becoming correlates of governmentality. In sum, this sub-theme’s explorations of *juku* as panoptic institutions reinforce GET 2 by showcasing how shadow education shapes students’ self-surveillance, internalising the neoliberal ideals of competition and quantifiable success under the pressures of market-driven accountability and strategic decision-making.

Sub-theme 2B: Hensachi, the Dehumanising Market Myth

While 2A delves into how *juku*, through panoptic discipline, normalise quantifiability and competition, this sub-theme explores *hensachi*, the deviation value used to gauge academic performance. In doing so, 2B reveals that, while reinforcing neoliberal ideals of measurable success, personal responsibility, and strategic decision-making, *hensachi* emerges as a dehumanising and, more pertinently, dishonest quantifier of academic value. As a reminder, *hensachi* is used to quantify Japanese schools and learners based on exam success (Goodman & Oka, 2018; Jones, 2019). As with *juku*, *hensachi* can be seen as a disciplinary power that normalises student conduct through surveillance and evaluation. Indeed, given that “an individual student’s *hensachi*³⁷ is determined through mock entrance exams conducted by major supplementary education providers such as *juku*” (Goodman & Oka, 2021, p. 133), the two remain inexorably linked. Here, a student’s *hensachi* is critical in determining their position within the hierarchy: “If you want to try hard and study hard, you can, like, go for the higher *hensachi* uni ... Realise where you are” (Sachiko, p. 64). The implication for panopticism is clear: *hensachi* is a normalised technology through which Sachiko self-assesses intelligence and educational worth. Kenji (p. 59), too, views *hensachi* as “one of the ways to see how smart the person is or how smart the school or university is”, while Elisa and Dream describe *hensachi* as a ‘productive’ and ‘powerful’ feature of academic competition:

“I want to say, like, do not... don’t do hensachi things. But it’s very good to be... very competitive ... hensachi brought people to study... inspired to study... you know? So, it’s a good thing...” (Elisa, p. 47).

“It has a really strong power for the students that are really, really working hard to get into the university.” (Dream, p. 84).

In each testimony, *hensachi* undergirds responsabilisation and self-discipline, encouraging learners to “work hard” and take accountability for their academic progress. Accepting *hensachi* marks

³⁷ Original italicisation throughout.

intelligence and success reflects entrepreneurialism, wherein participants view themselves as projects to be improved (Han, 2017; Kelly, 2006). *Hensachi*'s promise of success relative to individual effort and diligence guides learners to make strategic 'investments' in their studies. Sachiko and Kenji, in particular, expand their assessments beyond personal intelligence to include market values associated with HEIs. Elisa, while balancing caution and ambition between "*hensachi things*" and being "*inspired to study*", nonetheless supports Dream's view of *hensachi* as a catalyst for enhancing market value; this is not to say, however, that *hensachi* escapes critique:

"It's not good! (laughs) Because... I am... [pounds table] who I am ... So, I want to not compare ... but, it's an easy... system to people." (Kaori, p. 13).

"It's used to measure the score. But it's not our lives... yeah, it's just important for measuring. Because the number is really easy ... It's not correct, but... but that is Japanese style. It's like we are categorised." (Kaori, p. 72).

Kaori's frustration at being "*compare[d]*" and "*categorised*" underscores the emotional weight attached to systemic quantification. More pointedly, her self-reflection ("*I am... who I am*") hints at an internal struggle for identity when limited by neoliberal views of success. Regarding technologies of the self, positive and negative conceptions of *hensachi* reduce learners to their academic achievements, reinforcing quantifiability. In turn, students are responsabilised for achieving a high *hensachi*, placing the burden of success on the individual by emphasising personal effort and achievement. In gaining admission to a school with a high *hensachi*, metrics become a source of identity and self-worth, shaping how learners perceive themselves within the context of academic and, in time, vocational success. The most damning critique, however, came from Elisa (p. 48), who describes *hensachi* as a dishonest "*accessory*":

"It's just, like... an accessory. Hensachi is an accessory, not honest... the system is not... honest." (Elisa, p. 48).

In terms of *homo oeconomicus*, the characterisation of *hensachi* as an "*accessory*" indicates an understanding of calculative and utilitarian education. Here, one may view *hensachi* as a 'tool' for strategically enhancing one's 'brand value' against neoliberal quantification. The system, once again, governs academic journeys not through direct authority but as a pervasive and panoptic force. Elisa's assertion that the system is "*not honest*" and Yuuki's (p. 66) claim that "*you can't really tell how accurate it is. So... the other side is, I mean, it's, it's effective, but very ineffective*", meanwhile, align with critiques of neoliberal transparency and fairness (Lazzarato, 2009; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Indeed, one may draw parallels between *hensachi*'s dishonesty and Kawanishi's (2020) claim that *seinen* "are expected to understand and accept this double standard in many areas of life" ahead of *shakaijin* transitions. In expecting learners to succeed within an outwardly

meritocratic system lacking honesty, the rational principles of accountability, equality, and efficiency that neoliberal utopianism claims to uphold are forfeited (Ferlie, 2010).

“The students that entered by, like, normal way... has a really, really good. Yeah. has a really, really good score. But I think they’re, like (laughs) ... 30%? Something like that?” (Hana, p. 87)

“WIS people didn’t even study to get into this uni. So, I think, like, for some of the students, it’s their score. It’s not ours ... so... not really (laughs).” (Sachiko, p. 65).

“It’s not really... trustable ... I mean, the Western-U International Studies Department hensachi is really high... but that’s because only, like, 20% of the people took the exam. And, also, like, 80% of them come by the recommendation system. So, like, only 20% of the people really have the score.” (Yoshiko, p. 76).

In highlighting the discrepancy between Western-U’s reported *hensachi* and the actual distribution of scores among its student body, questions about the reliability of quantifiable academic achievement arise. Indeed, if holding regimes of truth as strategic inflexions between power and discourse (Foucault, 1995, 2008), claims about the perceived trustworthiness and the percentage of admissions undertaking “exam hell” draw our gaze to the orthodoxies shaping truth. As a disciplinary institution, WU engages in discursive practices to construct and enhance its prestige. Through a high *hensachi* ‘requirement’, the university promotes an image aligning with societal expectations for academic excellence. Through regimes of truth, discourses surrounding high *hensachi* scores and the perceived academic rigour associated with this profile contribute to the university’s reputation as an ‘élite’ institution. This process reinforces a “fixed” (Sachiko, p. 65) position within the academic hierarchy, ensuring that successive generations of rational *homo oeconomicus* seek enrolment to bolster their credentials. Sachiko (p. 65) clarifies:

“When you’re in Kansai, people, like, say, [REDACTED]³⁸ ... but those, like, four unis are just, like, private, like, in a sense, like, they’re all rich. But that’s it, like, as I said... hensachi doesn’t really, like, count, like, we don’t have the hensachi. And... you know, when you say, ‘I’m from Western-U, people say, ‘Oh, you’re from Western-U. Like it’s a cool uni’, but, like, they don’t, you know... it’s just an image. It’s just, like, a fixed concept in a sense.” (Sachiko, p. 65).

The “fixed” image of Western University as a “rich” and “cool” HEI high in regional prestige indicates that students and, more importantly, *future* students remain aware of the social, cultural, and economic capital attached to the institution. Returning to entrepreneurial selfhood, this truth

³⁸ Note: Sachiko used a colloquial noun grouping Kansai’s most prestigious private HEIs, including Western-U.

regime implies a commodification of learning, where the HEI represents a brand while students are, in turn, consumers making rational choices based on perceived economic utility and value. Societal expectations surrounding university reputation and pursuing a “cool” image contribute to governance where *seinen* regulate themselves based on an ‘accepted reality’ (in Beckerian terms) of external, market-oriented norms and values. Considering Yoshiko and Hana’s claims that only 20-30% of Western University learners ‘earned’ their *hensachi* through intense study and high academic performance, however, the university’s projected image also draws attention to those entrepreneurs who strategically maximised their chance of enrolment through *suisen* and *esukareitā* transitions. Here, the university’s flexible approach to admission further aligns with neoliberal governance by providing options for ‘savvy’ *homo oeconomicus* to strategically navigate the system and make choices based on self-interest (Giroux, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Thus, much like the *juku* depicted in 2A, this exploration of *hensachi* underscores the panoptic mechanisms driving academic self-surveillance and choice within Japan’s neoliberal framework.

Sub-theme 2C: Testing Bonds: Choice & Friendship During University Transitions

While the previous sub-theme portrays *hensachi* as a dehumanising and potentially dishonest measure of academic value that normalises competition through surveillance and evaluation, 2C details how the normalisation of university study as obligatory not only shapes individual aspirations toward entrepreneurial selfhood but fosters a competitive environment that impacts peer relationships and self-perception within the educational landscape. The threat of not attending college becomes a mechanism of self-discipline, normalising obligation as students align their entrepreneurial projects with neoliberal demands for credentialised human capital:

“Graduating from the university is necessary. That’s the minimum requirement in Japan. So, it’s not like ‘oh, I want to study in a university.’” (Kenji, p. 23).

“In the Japanese, like... social system, graduating university... is, like... a good thing. So, I thought, ‘I have to go to university.’” (Elisa, p. 26).

“I don’t think we had a decision not to go to uni... like, even if it’s not Western-U. It was like already set... like, it was decided.” (Sachiko, p. 59).

“It was an obligation to go to university.” (Taiki, p. 35).

In each instance, testimony reflects the internalisation of societal norms and the notion that HE participation is not merely a personal choice but a predetermined path ingrained in the social fabric of Japan’s *gakureki shakai*. Returning to Ball et al. (2002), impressions of university graduation as “good”, “decided”, “an obligation”, or “the minimum requirement” scaffold enduring and vividly imagined institutionalised biographies that incite and maintain entrepreneurial selfhood. Indeed, “to not go on to higher education is virtually unthinkable” (Ball et al., 2002, p. 342). As with all elements of Japanese education described thus far, that university enrollment was not a matter of individual choice but decided by society implies panopticism, where the perceived

obligation to transition to and from HE creates a sense of constant surveillance (Foucault, 1995). More pointedly, the supposed necessity of university graduation embeds an explicit instrumental-economic rationality of HE as a means to an end—as a tool or the “*most important resource*” (Dream, p. 89) for securing future economic benefits and societal approval:

“Ehh, to work in a company... famous or popular companies ... we MUST get into the university.” (Dream, p. 49).

“To Japanese people... graduating from university is a hire guarantee... and salary ... I want to get a higher salary in the future.” (Kaori, p. 8).

The explicit connection between HE and vocational outcomes, such as securing higher salaries and “*guarantee[d]*” employment in prestigious companies, reflects a rational calculation of self-interest. Here, Dream and Kaori are driven by economic considerations and the expectation that a university degree is crucial for mobility in the vocational market. This ‘common sense’ orthodoxy nudges *seinen* towards entrepreneurialism, prompting them to care for the self by strategically enhancing their ‘market value’ or ‘brand image’ against a backdrop of intense pressure and competition. Again, this pivot to individualism (Bourdieu, 1998) paints society in terms of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, with the threat of failure—of inadequately estimating, calculating, measuring, evaluating, and judging the market (Cruikshank, 1996, p. 233)—holding normative implications for one’s self-esteem (Foucault, 1988a). In this regard, teachers acting as disciplinary agents of governmentality actively shape the conduct of students, securing secondary education as a site where, through an atmosphere of explicit surveillance, disciplined ‘normalised biographies’ are established and enforced: “*They make it sound like ... if you don’t get into uni, it’s the end of the world*” (Sachiko, p. 26):

“Teachers, just, like, everyone, like, adults. Like, if you don’t get to a good uni, like, you’re... nnn (negative tone).” (Sachiko, p. 26).

“A teacher asked me, like, (laughs) ‘Won’t you go to university?’ Like, not, ‘What kind of university would you go to?’ Like... it’s a similar question, but it’s really different, ‘Won’t you go to?’ or ‘Which do you want to?’” (Kaori, p. 40).

“In homeroom class, or like when I talked about my career or future, they say, like, ‘Minayateru’ [follow the example]. Like, ‘Why don’t you do this? Everyone does it.’ Like, ‘Why do you try not to go to college? You can go into college, and everyone goes to college after high school. Why will you not go there?!’” (Yoshiko, p. 69).

The disciplinary pressure placed on learners by faculty to attend university renders education a tool for enhancing value in the neoliberal marketplace. Here, students are pushed to view

themselves as entities—indeed, *projects*—‘needing’ to invest in education for future success, framing academic choices as entrepreneurial outcomes. Again, one may draw parallels between socially enforced HE and Japan’s cultural emphasis on group cohesion, harmony, and *kejime*. Through reproducing normative discourse, the power-knowledge nexus operates “at a distance” (Rose, 2000, p. 323), enabling subjects to govern themselves while opening them to new modes of conduct (Foucault, 1980). Discourses surrounding HE attendance may be interpreted as a form of *kejime*, where *seinen* are expected to conform to a prescribed path for social harmony. The expectation that “*everyone does it*” regulates biographical transitions, with the desire to avoid deviating from this expected norm for the sake of ‘harmony’ moulding subjectivities in line with neoliberal enterprise and Japanese cultural values. Thus, the pressure to attend university becomes a technology of power, influencing one’s drive for self-evaluation, self-regulation, and self-development (Rose et al., 2006). Given self-esteem’s role in the production of ‘ethical’ subjects who, through adherence to social norms, gain the respect of their peers (Foucault, 1988a), the pressure to excel academically impacts peer relationships, contingent on social harmony:

“Let’s say... my friend got accepted to... the university, but if I fail, then... the way I would look at that person... will change a lot, for sure.” (Kenji, p. 16).

“I think it was good for, like, the... the aiming at the different school, as I... you know, studied with them together ... Yeah, yeah. I don’t feel good (laughs).” (Dream, p. 31).

“The most complex relationship is... this girl is the second grade in the test, then talking to people... talking to her friend, she was number one. She wasn’t fine. So, she really, like, umm... how to say in English... shito [struggle], like ... I feel that. So, it’s not... it’s not good, because it’s just a test, then it hurt the relationship.” (Kaori, pp. 29-30).

“I’m okay with both of us getting the same... you know... things. But I don’t like... when I fail, and they get what I want. And I don’t want that to happen. So, like, I... work for it.” (Sachiko, p. 55).

These statements highlight interpersonal rivalries between *homo oeconomicus* based on intense pressure to succeed. Kenji’s reference to conditional friendship suggests economic rationality in peer relations. In essence, success in academic competition is treated as a form of currency, impacting the ‘rational calculations’ of value *homo oeconomicus* place on their relationships in terms of profit and loss (Kim, 2016). Thus, Kenji’s altered perception suggests that *seinen* view friendship through an economic lens where successful transitions equate to social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Dream’s preference for HS classmates to aim for different universities upon graduation, meanwhile, highlights the impact of neoliberal values on social harmony. In a competitive academic environment with limited enrolment opportunities, where success and failure are, by design, individualised, the emotional toll of peers applying to the same institution

strains social relations. Kaori's recollection of a friend being "*number one*", meanwhile, underscores a reconfiguration of social standing and straining of social harmony. In essence, the competitive academic environment acts as a panoptic structure where, through being observed and *compared against* peers, *seinen* internalise success as measurable and competition as all-encompassing. Sachiko's belief in "*work[ing] for it*" reflects a concern for personal success and a desire for its extrinsic rewards. Her emphasis on self-regulating enterprise contributes to self-formation as *homo oeconomicus* by responsabilising academic success as self-determined (Kelly 2006). In sum, contingent relationships based on success or failure (as reported by Kenji and Dream) and the competitive struggles faced by individuals (Kaori and Sachiko) reflect the commodification of peer relations against academic success, highlighting the neoliberal trend of evaluating human capital based on their commodifiable skills, qualifications, and backgrounds (Urciuoli, 2008; Gershon, 2011). Consequently, sub-theme 2C's examination of how university attendance normalises self-discipline and influences peer relationships exemplifies the neoliberal ideal of competition scaffolding GET 2.

GET 2: Summary

GET 2 delves into how, through *juku* and *hensachi*, Japan's academic landscape fosters a panoptic culture of competition, self-surveillance, and quantification. *Juku*, Japan's shadow education institutions, instil rivalry and self-monitoring, turning peer relationships into economic calculations. The *hensachi* system further reinforces neoliberalism by quantifying academic success, promoting self-discipline and responsabilisation while simultaneously being criticised as dehumanising and dishonest. The societal pressure to attend university, seen as a minimum requirement for work in Japanese society, shapes students' choices and self-perception, embedding neoliberal ideals of credentialed human capital. In doing so, these findings collectively illustrate the intensely competitive nature of Japanese education, preparing us to explore Japan's 'credential society' and its enduring influence on one's social status and vocational opportunities.

GET 3: Fabricating Shakaijin: Gakureki, Linguistic Entrepreneurialism, & Corporate Performativity

While GET 2 explores the social implications of intense academic competition, GET 3's three sub-themes examine Japan's *gakureki shakai* ('credential society') and the influence of educational background on one's social status and career opportunities. Following the *gakureki* filter, a screening process where applicants are judged by HE affiliation, youths internalise the importance of attending prestigious universities, normalising education as a rational investment for enhancing one's market positioning (3A). This focus extends to linguistic entrepreneurialism, highlighting English as a valuable skill in global markets and its incorporation into self-branding strategies (3B). Finally, the dramaturgical features of *shūkatsu*, Japanese graduate recruitment, where individuals navigate a complex landscape of corporate expectations, results in strategic exaggeration during applications. Extending this critique, the perceived gaps in university-to-work transitions, including tensions surrounding the importance of academic achievements compared to extracurricular experiences and the pressure to prioritise job-seeking over university studies, highlights the nuanced relations between school-to-work transitions (3C). In sum, GET 3 explores the sub-themes of academic distinction, English proficiency as a personal brand value, and the performative nature of school-to-work transitions.

Sub-theme 3A: Gakureki Filters, Inequity, & Regionalisation

Having explored lived perceptions of academic performativity in GET 2, it is time to explore how neoliberal self-formation upholds professional competition. *Gakureki shakai* ('credential society') refers to a societal phenomenon where an individual's educational background ('*gakureki*'), notably the prestige of their alma mater, strongly influences their social status, career opportunities, and overall success in life (Nam, 2022; Okada, 2001). In this context, a utilitarian approach to graduate recruitment undergirds the *gakureki* filter, "a crude social deception" (Kawanishi, 2020) whereby job applicants are screened primarily, if not *exclusively*, on their university affiliation (Fukushima, 2018). From a Foucauldian (1979) perspective, *gakureki* governs enterprise, inciting youths to invest in their entrepreneurial projects to ascend the "credential ladder" (Lauder et al., 2012) and, in turn, accrue wealth. Student perceptions of *gakureki* thereby help explain credentialism as an embedded technology of power. Consequently, this sub-theme illustrates how educational prestige intertwines with personal identity, social validation, and career aspirations within a market-driven framework, highlighting the power hierarchies and self-regulatory mechanisms shaping individual investments in HE.

"Gakureki is powerful. Because, like I said ... we have to graduate from a great university to get a good job. So, yeah, gakureki makes... it's not an exaggeration to say, gakureki makes our life." (Taiki, p. 14).

"I mean, for my future career. Like, if I graduated from this uni, I would, like, get a good career... like... it's all connected to my future." (Sachiko, p. 37).

“If I have to choose one university, then ... I have to go to, like... higher universities with higher rank. So, yeah ... without going to university, it’s almost impossible to get a good... great job.” (Kenji, p. 7).

*“I want to work in a big company, and almost every company has *gakureki* filter. So... I wanted to go to Western-U.”* (Hana, p. 15).

Understanding that power is not merely a top-down force but dispersed throughout society (Foucault, 1979, 1998b), these quotes reflect the power relations embedded in school-to-work transitions. Here, Japan’s credential society normalises ‘worth’ as contingent on specific institutional profiles. The cultural emphasis on graduating from prestigious HEIs to obtain high-level employment suggests a ‘care for the self’, with panoptic expectations for the ‘right kind’ of *gakureki* driving educational choice. Thus, *homo oeconomicus* come to view education in utilitarian terms, with university prestige normalised as a rational investment or ‘tool’ for enhancing economic value in the labour market. Through this “performance of exchange relations” (Kelly, 2006, p. 29), the *gakureki* filter becomes a mechanism through which *seinen* discipline themselves, internalising the responsibility for realising market demands and positioning social validation as a source of self-esteem and pressure:

“I have a good influence because I go to this school, but... if I didn’t, if I were in another ... a little bit lower... ah, university? ... Shakaijin will... would judge: ‘Ah, this student might not be good or not smart, because this, ahhh... student is from, you know, this school.’” (Elisa, p. 8).

“It’s a pressure but, at the same time... now that I’m in this university... you know... it’s not that I have a... bad filter. Like, I have a Western-U-graduated filter, so, I think... that’s... good (laughs).” (Sachiko, p. 49).

*“For me it’s *arigatai* [appreciated]... *Kedo* [however]... if I didn’t go to Western-U, I would be so angry.”* (Hana, p. 72).

*“But fortunately, I have good *gakureki*, so...”* (Kaori, p. 56).

Elisa’s statement, in particular, reveals the internalised surveillance of the *gakureki* filter: fears of being judged negatively by *shakaijin* (‘working adults’) for attending a “lower” HEI prompt self-regulation and conformity. More pointedly, her anxiety illustrates how deeply ingrained market values are in Elisa’s perception of self-worth. Sachiko’s positive conception of a “Western-U-graduated filter” further illustrates how entrepreneurial *seinen* incorporate the ‘brand values’ associated with educational credentials into a self-marketing strategy, once again demonstrating agency within the constraints of neoliberal governance. Despite acknowledging pressure, she lauds prestigious educational backgrounds, suggesting engagement in conforming to established norms. The knowledge-power nexus is restrictive *and* productive (Foucault, 1995; Raaper, 2019). Hana’s

mention of being “angry” if attending a lower-ranked HEI suggests a critical awareness of *gakureki shakai*, but, as with Sachiko, an economic subjectivity—attending a prestigious university is a rational investment for personal advancement. Indeed, from an individualistic perspective, recognition of the *gakureki* filter as “appreciated”, “fortunate”, or a “good influence” marks the strategic advantage conferred by attending Western-U over ‘lesser’ colleges.

“In a lower university. It would totally not help ... It’s an obstacle...” (Elisa, p. 37).

“When you don’t go to university, or get, like, the... education, you know, people don’t always get the better job in their own career.” (Dream, p. 14).

“For people who go to, like, who go to universities with a lower rank, they might not be motivated, because they already know they wouldn’t be accepted by a lot of companies.” (Kenji, p. 41).

“Companies choose people, by their, you know, gakureki. They only focus on which universities they graduated from ... they don’t even read [applications] ... if we don’t graduate good university.” (Taiki, p. 10).

“You have to understand their view. They’re seeing 700 applications; they’re not going to see the whole thing. If they see a kid that went to Todai³⁹, and the kid that went to a normal school, obviously, the Todai one would pass...” (Yuuki, p. 56).

In this context, corporate entities serve as agents of governmentality, reinforcing the hierarchical structure of HE and shaping conduct through competitive recruitment. Internalising surveillance through fear of failure and judgment, the stigmatisation of *seinen* with ‘lower’ *gakureki* marks the division between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in Japan’s neoliberal arena. Indeed, disciplinary power permeates Japan’s *gakureki shakai*: “Everyone asks you... where, what uni you go to... what you learn, I mean ... Yeah, at the end of the day, they try... they’re trying to, like, kind of judge you.” (Sachiko, p. 9). By questioning students’ motivation in lower-ranked universities, Kenji reflects Giroux’s (2014) claim that individualism normalises accountability over larger social forces. If one fails in their enterprise, they do so “due to a combination of their flawed character and poor life choices” (Costas Batlle, 2019, pp. 418-419). Understanding that Confucian social harmony involves people falling “into proper places and order” (Zhang et al., 2005, p. 109), questioning motivation may be rooted in the belief that individuals who attend less prestigious colleges fulfil ‘lower’ roles in the social hierarchy. In doing so, the neoliberal understanding that individual drive and effort scaffold success normalises. However, despite Western University’s high *hensachi* (Toshin, 2023) and brand power—placing in the top 3 HEIs regionally for liberal arts education (Shingakunet, 2023)—students perceive this prestige as locally-bound:

³⁹ The University of Tokyo, Japan’s most prestigious HEI.

“I thought I couldn’t get a good job, even if I graduated from this university, because, you know, there are a lot of better. I mean, you know, smarter universities in Kantō⁴⁰.” (Taiki, p. 11).

“Tokyo is better, and foreign countries are much better, I thought ... Like, in shūkatsu, they thought the same thing ... It’s more, like, if they go to a foreign country or Tokyo ... So, I got influenced so much.” (Yoshiko, p. 46).

“I think, ahh... if the... Western-U was there in Tokyo, that will be a little bit helpful.” (Dream, p. 73).

“I think Western-U is... always one of the most known universities in this region. But... like, I felt when I talk with someone from other parts of Japan, sometimes, well, they often didn’t know what my university is.” (Kenji, pp. 25-26).

“In Osaka, I think so. But, if you go to Tokyo, no. I think some people don’t even know Western-U ... I was, like, what? (laughs) You don’t know Western-U?!” (Sachiko, p. 51).

Considerations of Tokyo and foreign universities as “*smarter*”, “*better*”, or “*helpful*” further rationalise HE as an economic investment. Here, *seinen* define learning profiles in terms of marketability and the value and limitations they bring to *shūkatsu*. In doing so, the economic subjectivity intertwines with the capacity to meet market demands for specific educational backgrounds. Concerns over the perceived hierarchy of Japanese HE reflect the panoptic gaze and internalised surveillance where individuals anxiously evaluate their academic profiles against a national standard (or truth), which is, in turn, reproduced during “attempt[s] to approximate the normal” (Oksala, 2011, p. 89). Taiki’s worry about not finding “*a good job*”, for example, intensifies his internal scrutiny, aligning him with a neoliberal ethos where self-worth is closely tied to one’s achievements in the educational and vocational markets. Concerns about Western-U’s national profile highlight broader governmentality, with anxieties over perceived inadequacies normalising region-specific standards and expectations. Accordingly, Tokyo-targeted recruitment reinforces the rational belief that *homo oeconomicus* are responsible for aligning their entrepreneurial projects with the demands of corporations and the broader economic goals of the State (Kelly, 2006, p. 24). As recognised by participants, however, *gakureki* does not merely reproduce ‘taken-for-granted’ academic prestige and regional divisions, but, from a Bourdieusian (1986) perspective, hereditary cultural and economic capital:

“Gakureki shakai continues the gap between rich and poor, I think. Because rich people get... easily get a good education, I think. And, so, in that aspect, it’s bad.” (Yoshiko, p. 11).

⁴⁰ The Honshu Region, which includes the Greater Tokyo Area.

“I feel like... it’s very systematic, where, if your parents are rich, the kids will end up rich, if the parents are poor ... Yeah. I feel like there aren’t many opportunities where you can leave that.” (Yuuki, p. 34).

“Yeah, for people who don’t have enough money, then it’s gonna be a bad... effect.” (Kenji, p. 14).

“Yeah, I think it depends... on the family. Yeah. Because of the... yeah... money problem.” (Hana, p. 18).

“And money! All other things money, money! (laughs)” (Elisa, p. 8).

Despite acknowledging the systemic inequalities inherent to Japan’s *gakureki shakai*, testimony provided throughout this chapter indicates that, as correlates of governmentality (Foucault, 2008), learners negotiate with the system to ensure success. Indeed, recalling that power is invariably exercised over ‘active agents’ capable of resisting the status quo (McKee, 2009), the resigned acceptance of socio-economic disparities, or ‘money problems’, typify the internalisation and *normalisation* of external standards that reinforce docility. Yoshiko (p 11) and Yuuki’s (p. 34) statements, for example, illustrate their awareness of structural barriers endemic to the credential society, yet imply an acceptance of inequality as an immutable part of education. Indeed, Yuuki (p. 56) is only too aware of his privilege within this system, noting: *“Western-U also has the brand value of good education and good rich kids.”* Understanding that, under neoliberal governmentality, subjects become “complicit and active constituents in the reproduction of the regime of truth” (Rothe & Collins, 2016, p. 11) and, thus, the very inequalities they critique, the testimonies of Kenji (p. 14), Hana (p. 18), and especially Elisa’s (p. 8) emphatic and resigned response, reflect a pervasive internalisation of inequality. In doing so, they legitimise Foucault’s (2008) claim that power is not *only* exercised by top-down institutions but manifested through self-regulating *conduct*. Consolidating the above, this sub-theme explores the *gakureki* filter and how a societal emphasis on educational prestige intertwines with personal identity, career aspirations, regionalisation, and socio-economic inequality, advancing our understanding of the prestige-bound school-to-work transitions scaffolding GET 3.

Sub-theme 3B: Linguistic Entrepreneurialism as a Capital of Distinction

While 3A focuses on *gakureki shakai* and the influence of alma mater on social status and career opportunities, sub-theme 3B centres on English proficiency as a strategic asset for vocational transitions. It is broadly accepted that Japanese HE emphasises English education to prepare graduates for work in global markets (Kubota & Takeda, 2021; Rose & McKinley, 2018). As part of the Top Global University Project (TGUP), Western University seeks to develop global human capital through English education and bilateral study-abroad programs (Matsutani, 2018). Western-U underscores the importance of English proficiency and internationalism in its TGUP project summary, including data on inbound-outbound study abroad and each faculty’s standardised English test scores (MEXT, 2021). Considering this study’s participants were drawn exclusively from Western University’s School of International Studies, which boasts the highest

English level among all faculties (MEXT, 2021), interviewees exhibit what De Costa et al. (2016, p. 696) define as *linguistic entrepreneurialism*: “the act of aligning with the moral imperative to strategically exploit language-related resources for enhancing one’s worth in the world”. An extension of Foucault’s (2008) entrepreneurial subjectivity, De Costa et al. (2021) offer a compelling lens to assess rational linguistic enterprise. As such, this sub-theme showcases how participants strategically invest in English proficiency as a competitive asset, aligning with neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility, adaptability to markets, and self-branding (Gershon, 2016). Indeed, one may find examples of linguistic entrepreneurialism in student choices to attend educational institutions based on the perceived quality of English instruction:

“That one provided a lot of English classes. Also ... a lot of returnees are going to that high school.” (Kenji, p. 5).

“I just wanted to, like, be in an environment where... that was international. And where I could learn English.” (Sachiko, p. 34).

“Hmm... it depends on the class. English! English! Is... it totally matters, but, like... some class... the studies in some classes are not useful...” (Elisa, p. 39).

“I think it was the right choice to come to this university. Because, you know, I don’t think I can take great English classes like this in another university.” (Taiki, p. 37).

Kenji and Sachiko, who attended WIS, sought out this school, at least partly due to its English immersion and opportunities for international exposure. In doing so, they were not *merely* making educational choices but active agents in a system that governs them through the neoliberal management of language (De Costa et al., 2021). Kenji’s choice of WIS because it provides “*a lot of English classes*” suggests a strategic decision based on the perceived utility of acquiring language skills for future success. Sachiko’s desire to be in an international environment and learn English, meanwhile, aligns with the idea of making choices that are advantageous to participation in a globalised world. In doing so, they position themselves as enterprises that strategically invest in linguistic capital to enhance prospects. Elisa’s belief that English “*totally matters*” and is more “*useful*” than other classes suggests a recognition of differentiated power within education wherein discourses shaping knowledge—and its perceived utility—distribute unevenly. Indeed, lest we forget that “with the progress of globalisation in the economy and in society, it is *essential*”⁴¹ that our children acquire communication skills in English” (MEXT, 2003). Both Elisa and Taiki demonstrate a degree of agency within institutional constraints. Elisa is discerning about the usefulness of specific classes, suggesting a passive engagement with her educational environment. Conversely, Taiki asserts his agency when making the “*right choice*”, indicating autonomous

⁴¹ Emphasis added.

subjectification (Davies & Bansel, 2007; McGushin, 2011). Indeed, in terms of subject formation and self-governance, *seinen* view English as a marker of success, adaptability, and resilience:

“I’ve spent... much effort to learn English.” (Yoshiko, p. 40).

“Like, I learned a lot of new words every day, and whenever I had a question, I just, I just didn’t leave them alone, which I just... I... every time I asked the teacher after school, after the lecture.” (Kenji, p. 9).

“I studied very hard to get Eiken pre-first, but I failed three times ... I studied about it. It didn’t go well. So... I tried to study more and more to fix it, and, then... finally I passed.” (Elisa, p. 11).

“When motivation is down... then, when I was in high school, then... I was really confused about my grade of English score, then I... at first, and I don’t want to study English. But it’s really important to me... and I have to study because of tests, or something. So, I pushed myself and kejime... kejime wo tsukeru [drew a line between two situations].” (Kaori, p. 12).

“But, compared to those people [shūkatsu competitors], I have a gakureki and, also, I can study better than them. So, I thought it was great for me to master English.” (Taiki, pp. 18-19).

Testimony extolling the pursuit of English, as expressed by Kenji, Elisa, Kaori, and Taiki, exemplifies the neoliberal agenda for skill development and accountability. Their entrepreneurial focus on personal dedication, resilience in the face of setbacks, test-taking, and linguistic mastery corresponds to neoliberal managerialism’s demand for measurable outcomes (Ferlie, 2010). Kaori’s consideration of *kejime* when pushing herself to study despite lacking motivation reflects self-disciplining toward external norms and, from a Japanese cultural perspective, alignment with societal expectations for diligence and harmony in academic pursuits (Bray & Lykins, 2012). In each instance, participant actions conform with the expectations of neoliberal governance, where responsible entrepreneurs are disciplined to take the initiative in their education and skill development. However, it is Taiki’s perception of English as a competitive asset that, more than any other, aligns him with global neoliberalism’s “emphasis on accountability, competitiveness, efficiency, and profit in language education” (De Costa et al., 2021, p. 141). The desire to “*master English*” is not solely for personal fulfilment but framed as a stratagem within Japan’s competitive landscape. Again, he positions himself as an active agent who can shape his trajectory and outcomes by leveraging his educational background and skills; this is not to say, however, that Taiki is the only student connecting linguistic proficiency to vocational outcomes:

“Like showing my language ability and... showing my experience... throughout my life. I wanted to see, like, how much it’s valid to be evaluated as shakaijin.” (Kenji, p. 36).

“[Interviewer: why do you speak English?] Because the company requires it...” (Hana, p. 62).

“At least they [global workers] have to speak English.” (Dream, p. 58).

“I think language is a given [for global workers] in this age... where people can speak English.” (Yuuki, p. 50).

“English is necessary for me because I want to work globally.” (Taiki, p. 36).

“I can be competitive when I talk about language skills... about how much I put effort to reach the goal... [I compete with] basically anyone who wants... to be working at the company ... that I want to be working at.” (Kenji, p. 45)

As personal brand enhancement, English is not merely a means of communication but a marketable or competitive ‘asset’ for vocational success. Kenji’s desire to showcase his language proficiency and experiences for evaluation implies his awareness of conforming to panoptic discipline whereby *shakaijin* regulate their conduct in anticipation of professional observation and assessment (Foucault, 1982). In Hana’s case, corporate Japan’s perceived demand for English embeds disciplinary surveillance, reflecting an internalisation of market norms and the influence of governmentality on shaping entrepreneurial choices and conduct (Rose, 1999). Indeed, framing English as the “*least*”, a “*given*”, or “*necessary*” for international work encapsulates an entrepreneurial ‘affective regime’, where, following neoliberalism’s exploitation of self-care (Foucault, 2005), “an *ethical*⁴² imperative where becoming a linguistic entrepreneur is seen as the responsibility of an ideal neoliberal subject” (De Costa et al., 2016, p. 696). In subjectively embracing the affective regime of English-linguistic entrepreneurship, Dream, Yuuki, and Taiki internalise ethical demands for responsible global human capital, “who takes good care of one’s own human capital and contributes to society through conscientious management of it” (De Costa et al., 2021, p. 141). Finally, Kenji’s imagined exploitation of language to best *shūkatsu* rivals reflects agency in hyper-competition, wherein English proficiency is framed as a personal responsibility and strategic commodity (Peck et al., 2018; Kelly, 2006). Consistent with GET 3’s exploration of competitive vocational transitions, 3B emphasises how learners strategically invest in English, aligning with the neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility, adaptability to global markets, and self-branding (Gershon, 2016).

Sub-theme 3C: Control, Performativity, & Gaps in University-to-Work Transitions

While the previous sub-theme focuses on strategic investment in linguistic capital aligning with personal responsibility and adaptability, 3C delves into the pressures to conform, self-regulate, and strategically present oneself during job-hunting. Indeed, the performative behaviour and

⁴² Emphasis added.

adaptation strategies described by learners juggling corporate expectations reveal a complex interplay between external pressures and internal negotiation. Foucault's (1995) disciplinary power suggests that neoliberal societies develop surveillance mechanisms to monitor and control *homo oeconomicus*. *Shūkatsu*, Japan's prolonged graduate recruitment system, with its strict rules, hierarchical structures, and intense competition, exemplifies this phenomenon. Here, pressures to accommodate corporate discourse during the recruitment process regulate *seinen* job hunters, maturing them into responsible working adults, *shakaijin* (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Kawanishi, 2020). In establishing criteria for success in vocational transitions, *shūkatsu* normalises specific behaviours, qualifications, and aspirations, perpetuating a cycle of systematic conformity (Smith, 2021). However, this self-regulation, driven by the cultural imperative for rule compliance and in-group harmony (Fu, 2016; Zhang et al., 2005), accelerates an anticipated lack of independence:

"I thought, like, having your opinion, and being independent was, like, very important. But I took this, like, class. And I heard, like... stories from those who experienced, like, the shūkatsu. And they were, like, having your opinion could be good, but could be bad. Because the company might expect someone that's, like, that don't have that opinion." (Sachiko, p. 49).

"They always need to focus on the company's profit. So, I think they can't, like, act... free... really?" (Hana, p. 92).

"Just listen and obey (laughs) ... Like, people who listen and obey, just say 'yes' people, can get the job in shūkatsu." (Yoshiko, p. 58).

"Companies ... they want us to be listening, listening to what they say." (Elisa, p. 64).

"Companies have, you know, strict rules too, like, you know, follow the orders." (Taiki, p. 75).

"I think that at work, you might have to repress it [independence]... push it down." (Yuuki, p. 69).

It bears repeating that "knowledge from school is no use to [Japanese] companies. We don't have any expectations concerning specialist knowledge from schools. What companies want is individuality, creativity and vitality, not knowledge" (Cited in Yano, 2013, p. 68). Additionally, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2016, p. 10) predict, "'working' will be expected in autonomous and diverse styles by independent individuals". These claims align with the market's preference for self-regulating, competitive, and judicious *entrepreneurial projects*; yet, one would be wise to heed Rear's (2016) warning that business groups exploit "these keywords to paint an idealized vision of Japan in which workers are free to pursue their own goals and careers without interference. In reality, however, they may be seen as discursive masks for a neoliberal agenda" (p. 211). Indeed, it appears that *seinen* are all too aware of this paradox. Sachiko, for

example, explicitly addresses contradictory calls for independent workers, with the potential negative consequences for “*having an opinion*” panoptically disciplining graduates to accommodate deceptive and ambiguous discourse. Once again, *seinen* applicants “are expected to understand and accept this double standard” (Kawanishi, 2020). In focusing “*on the company’s profits*”, “*listen[ing] and obey[ing]*”, “*listening to what they say*”, “*follow[ing] the orders*”, and “*push[ing] it down*”, Hana, Yoshiko, Elisa, Taiki, and Yuuki expect to manage their self-presentation strategically and normalise conduct to appease corporate norms. In doing so, they highlight the disciplinary mechanisms shaping economically rational *homo oeconomicus* and, in terms of personal choice and development, entrepreneurial subjects (Kelly, 2006). This pressure to self-discipline and conform gives rise to performativity:

“I feel a lot of pressure and nervous before an interview, and then... so, I went... how do I say? I feel, like... a lot of... I feel a lot of pressure that I have to be, like... smart, and I need to talk...” (Elisa, p. 51).

“I feel like there is a correct answer. They want the answer... that they... need. You should say what they think... ‘Oh, good!’ and they accept you.” (Kaori, p. 77).

“I don’t know a better word for this... but, like, bullshit, you know? I hear there are actually books on how to get good scores. And, like, the personality tests in Japan and stuff like that. So, it’s just... they want like the... I don’t know, the exemplary, students.” (Yuuki, p. 69).

“You need to, you know, show yourself, like, for example... if I can speak, like I said, I can’t speak French, but I can say my name in French. And, you know, some... most of Japanese people tend to can’t speak French, but, you know, in job interview, you have to say, ‘I can speak French because I can say my name’... Yeah, I think these kinds of abilities are necessary.” (Taiki, p. 47).

“No (laughs) ... we need to, like, tell a lie sometimes. Because we want to show we are really good.” (Hana, p. 91).

Elisa and Kaori’s fear of being judged reflects a panoptic environment where *seinen* are compelled to meet expectations for “*smart*” applicants communicating the “*correct answer*”. Again, regulating one’s persona to the norms set by prospective employers aligns with entrepreneurial subjectivity and the technologisation of the self. Here, participants acknowledge the need to take responsibility for presenting themselves in specific ways, with concerns about abilities and the requirement to exaggerate or lie to appear competent, highlighting the centrality of self-esteem to *shūkatsu*. Interestingly, Yuuki’s reading of *shūkatsu* as “*bullshit*” mirrors Lorenz’s (2012, p. 625) description of “the bullshit nature of NPM discourse”, itself based on Frankfurt’s (2005, pp. 33-34) definition: “this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of ‘bullshit’”. With this definition in view, participant experiences provide sufficient evidence to suggest that Japanese corporations implicitly endorse,

if not outright expect, ‘bullshit’ during *shūkatsu*. Indeed, when asked what advice he would give to job hunters for successful transitions, Taiki (p. 51) humorously suggests they “*should learn about gomasuri [sycophancy]*”. Regardless, allusions to self-help books, personality tests, strategic exaggeration, and outright lying reflect the internalisation of neoliberal strategies for success within entrepreneurial subjectivities. This conduct resonates with Japan’s cultural emphasis on “idealized self-presentation” (Johnson, 1995, p. 246) and a strategic display of skills and competencies to maximise one’s market value (Gershon, 2011). Continuing this line of thought, it is also worth remembering Kawanishi’s (2020) claim that under the gaze of the *gakureki* filter’s “crude social deception”, one’s GPA or academic accomplishments are largely irrelevant:

“I always try to keep it as high as possible, and I would say it’s quite high because it’s still, like, the top 5% in my faculty, but... I know there are a lot of companies which don’t care about GPA.” (Kenji, p. 42).

“(Emphasis) Nooo. I can say that. No, totally... no. It doesn’t matter ... The company doesn’t care about GPA, and so I don’t care GPA.” (Elisa, p. 38).

“I have a lot of friends that, like, don’t care about it whatsoever, as long as they get the credits and graduate.” (Yuuki, p. 57).

“It doesn’t matter, maybe, in Japanese society.” (Kaori, p. 57).

“I think it’s not necessary because my friend ... will go to Mitsubishi Shoji, and it’s super, super difficult to, you know, to go there from Western-U. But he didn’t have, you know, a great GPA. But he has, you know, great experiences. And, also, he has experiences like club activity. He belongs to the rugby team.” (Taiki, pp. 50-51).

“If you’re on the football team, like, you’re set, right? And, so, a lot of companies kind of look at the discipline people get from sports, and then just assume it’ll transfer.” (Yuuki, p. 16).

“I heard the experience in the club team... like sport team... is much more important than GPA in the company. Because they think they can do teamwork. And, secondly, they care about the GPA. So, like, for us, not doing the club team stuff. Like, we need to get good GPAs.” (Yoshiko, p. 60).

While Kenji’s high GPA suggests *homo oeconomicus*’ strategic and rational self-discipline (Foucault, 1995), discrepancies between his efforts and the perceived indifference of corporations reflect the uncertain surveillance of *shūkatsu*. Additionally, while Elisa’s disregard for GPA may appear, on the surface, *unenterprising*, she showcases self-governance by adapting her conduct (responsibilisation) based on perceived market norms. Yuuki’s statement, too, suggests a normalised adaption among students to demands for credentialed—if not ‘academic’—human capital. Showcasing the role of *kejime*, meanwhile, Kaori hints at a divergence between global neoliberal ideologies and local cultural norms and, in doing so, the impact of governmentality on

societal expectations. Perhaps most interesting, however, is prioritising sporting participation over GPA. Here, the emphasis on discipline and the teamwork abilities gained from sports as a transferable skill reflects self-governance. Individuals internalise the expectation that specific experiences, such as sports participation, are advantageous for navigating *shūkatsu*, relegating GPA to an afterthought or something to be prioritised by non-athletic students. From a neoliberal standpoint, athletes are accustomed to setting personal goals, persevering through challenges, and demonstrating individual initiative. Additionally, they are regularly evaluated based on measurable outcomes, such as scores, times, or rankings, aligning them with NPM's preference for workers efficiently and competitively maximising their performance against 'objective' indicators of success (Ferlie, 2010; Lorenz, 2012). Finally, what of Yano's (2013, p. 66) description of "job-seeking activities carried out by students while neglecting their studies for 18 months [as] an overly stupid Japanese-style event"?

"The professor can't... be found saying, 'No, like, you have to come to class.' But, at the same time, I know kids that just don't go to class. So, at that point, it's like, what's the point of being in college?" (Yuuki, p. 58).

"It's hard, but I mean... it's your life. So, you should be the one, like, to choose which one is more important. It's not the teachers who tell you which one is more important." (Sachiko, p. 53).

"When I ask shakaijin what kind of skills do I have to, like... learn while I'm in university, they said 'Ahh, not really. You will learn when you once you get the job.'" (Elisa, p. 40).

"But, if... once you start working, then you might be working till you retire for, like, several decades, and... then... yeah, it makes sense that they want to prioritise job-hunting." (Kenji, pp. 42-43).

Without over-emphasising "NPM bullshit" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 627), students are expected to self-regulate and attend classes without direct enforcement (Yuuki, Sachiko). However, *shūkatsu* upholds scholastic bullshit by inciting students to commit truancy and neglect their studies, downplaying the traditional significance or truth of education in favour of an economically pragmatic focus (Kelly, 2006). In doing so, and as highlighted by Yuuki, *shūkatsu* calls into question the very purpose of Japanese HE, an institution at once seemingly mandatory for high-level employment, yet willfully disregarded by recruiters and job-hunters—hence, *bullshit*. Returning to Foucault (1995), this testimony highlights how market forces discipline compliance, showcasing neoliberalism's extension beyond economic institutions into adjacent societal domains. The acceptance that skills will be learned on the job, as described by Elisa, underscores individuals as rational actors motivated by self-interest and maximising utility within the economy. Kenji's reasoning that he might work for "*several decades*" also resonates with *homo oeconomicus*; here, he is a rational actor motivated by long-term economic interests. Sachiko, meanwhile, emphasises

personal responsibility in choosing priorities, aligning her with neoliberalism's preference for individuals actively managing and investing in themselves to enhance employability. More broadly, participant negotiation between attending university and engaging in *shūkatsu* highlights the influence of governmentality, where *seinen* govern themselves according to corporate expectations. Perhaps the most apt summary of corporate Japan's bullshit inflexions with HE, however, can be found in this question from Yoshiko (p. 62):

“Like, why... I don't understand why companies let the students skip class to, like, be in the interview for them? ... like, students who easily skip the class, maybe don't have the responsibility to work in your company, too, I think? (laughs)”

GET 3: Summary

GET 3 explores Japan's *gakureki shakai*, focusing on the impact of educational backgrounds on social status and career prospects. Specifically, it highlights the *gakureki* filter, where university affiliation heavily influences job opportunities, leading youths to view prestigious universities as essential for success. The concept of linguistic entrepreneurialism is also examined, showcasing English proficiency as a valuable asset in global markets and a strategic tool in self-marketing during *shūkatsu*, Japan's graduate recruitment process. Participant testimonies also uncover the pressure to conform and strategically present oneself during vocational recruitment, shedding light on the performative nature of school-to-work transitions and the conflicting academic expectations set by corporate Japan. In sum, GET 3 encompasses educational prestige, English proficiency as a professional asset, and the performative aspects of Japan's hyper-competitive vocational market.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented three superordinate themes (GETs, 1, 2 and 3) and the eleven sub-themes to address my research question: *How does Japan's enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?* In GET 1's five sub-themes, I begin by uncovering strategic awareness of the competitive advantages of private high schools, shaped by neoliberal policies, including enrolling in *suisen* and *esukareitā* schools to secure entry into prestigious universities. Next, the pressures associated with standardised testing are explored, reflecting the “instrumental view of education” (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020, p. 1) and struggles for agency. In sub-theme 1C, the surveillance mechanisms upholding *suisen* illustrate the pervasive impact of governmentality on HS-to-university transitions, whereas 1D reveals *esukareitā gakkō* as perpetuating social inequity and complacency while also curtailing agency and normalising economic rationalities. GET 1's final sub-theme highlights ‘élite’ international *esukareitā gakkō* as fostering self-sufficiency, accountability, and the necessary skills for future economic productivity.

In GET 2, sub-theme 2A, *juku*, unregulated shadow education institutions normalise intense competition, fostering panoptic self-discipline and responsibility among students through seating arrangements, grade rankings, and quantifiability. Closely tied to *juku*, *hensachi*, a

quantifying system tied to mock exams and academic hierarchy, normalises self-discipline, responsibility, and competitive behaviour, impacting one's identity and worth. Additionally, sub-theme 2C reveals how social norms pressure *seinen* to perceive university attendance as obligatory for success, fostering a panoptic environment and re-positioning peer relationships as economically bound. In emphasising alma mater prestige, the credential filter described in GET 3, sub-theme 3A, steers student conformity to market conceptualisations of success ahead of job-hunting. In 3B, Participants strategically leverage English proficiency as a marketable asset for their personal 'brand', aligning with the global skill-based agenda. Finally, sub-theme 3C highlights *shūkatsu*, Japanese graduate recruitment, as fostering self-regulation and performativity, with contradictory corporate expectations leading to strategic 'bullshit' during recruitment. Now, to discuss the implications of these results for the 'bigger picture' of Japanese society and, more pertinently, the institutionalised biographical transition points of TGUP students.

DISCUSSION

Chapter Introduction

This project's 'golden thread' is to understand how Japanese education reimagines subjects as entrepreneurial projects via the technologies and rationalities upholding neoliberal governance. To fully address my research question, I discuss my findings, placing them within Japanese society's 'bigger picture'. I first organise neoliberal "institutionalised biograph[ies]" (Kelly, 2006, p. 18) around the culturally relevant transition points marking Japanese personhood: *shōnen/shōjo* (youth), *seinen* (social adolescence), and *shakaijin* (social adulthood). In doing so, and in line with critical realism, I am positioned to relate my participant's perceived events, observations, and experiences (the empirical domain) to Japan's NPM-derived education system (the actual domain), itself organised around the generative mechanisms enabling and constraining action (Anderson, 2020), the real domain's neoliberal governmentality. I next examine *gakureki*, or academic credentialism, as a neoliberal technology of power, highlighting how a pervasive cultural emphasis on credentialed resources shapes career opportunities and social mobility, fostering a culture of hyper-competition, self-regulation, and quantification, which, in turn, produces calculable and docile bodies. Finally, by confronting Japanese educational inequality, I explore how a heavily privatised, education system economically divides 'winners' and 'losers', aligning conduct with dominant power structures and further normalising individualism over collective wellbeing.

Forging 'Functional Grown-ups', but in Neoliberal Terms...

Revisiting my literature review, Uehara (2016) describes Japanese colleges as explicitly orientated to achieving "a rapid transformation of their students from 'children' who lack essential social know-how into functional 'grown-ups'". In essence, echoing Kelly's (2006, p. 18) claim that neoliberal society views the individual "as an enterprise, a project, a work in progress"; they are, by extension, assumed to be 'incomplete' or 'deficient' (Costas Battle, 2017). As will be argued here, however, the conditioning of Japanese youths as 'functional' neoliberal adults, *homo oeconomicus*, begins significantly earlier and comes to be reinforced throughout their biographical projects. In an education system rooted in NPM (Bjork, 2015; Nitta, 2008), emphasis is placed on creating self-reliant, adaptable, and self-optimising 'units' of human capital. Through *laissez-faire* reform, graded prestige, rigorous competition, and an education system drenched in societal anxiety (Horiguchi et al., 2015; Shintani, 2013; Tsuneyoshi, 2004), individualism emerges as the default form. Consequently, Japanese youths are systematically disciplined to navigate and thrive in an enterprise society, where personal success is equated with economic productivity and narrow self-interest (Olssen & Peters, 2005). It is only natural, therefore, that we begin with *shōnen/shōjo* as they commence their journeys toward *seinen* and, ultimately, 'functional grown-ups', *shakaijin*.

Shōnen and Shōjo: Steps on the Path to Neoliberal Subjectivity

Situating Japanese personhood within context, *shōnen* references young and adolescent males of around 7 to 18 years old—or from the start of compulsory education until graduation from HS—while *shōjo* signifies females within the same range. Revisiting participant testimonies, it is apparent that Japanese youths are conditioned from this stage to navigate an educational terrain anchored to marketisation, fostering a mindset of self-optimisation. The emphasis on quantitative

competitiveness, individual accountability, and tactical decision-making during formal and non-formal schooling aligns with the neoliberal objective of forging judicious, economically productive subjects. This conditioning is not merely an incidental outcome but embedded; upon entering education, *shōnen/shōjo* are introduced to a system prioritising prestige differentiation and ‘strategic planning. Elisa, Dream, and Taiki, for instance, highlight private secondary institutions, with their specialised curricula and resources, as rational stepping stones to ‘élite’ schools, reinforcing the importance of choice ahead of educational transitions. Through “*special*” (Elisa, p. 24), “*unique*” (Dream, p. 46), and “*accessible*” (Yuuki, p. 11) value-added options, private education is interpreted as providing a competitive edge over its public counterpart, which is viewed as deficient. A further indication of how private schooling conditions entrepreneurial projects is the strategic prioritisation of non-traditional pathways, including the *suisen* and *esukareitā* systems, to secure admissions to prestigious colleges without enduring ‘exam hell.’ Irrespective of their ultimate success, all learners demonstrate their appreciation of market dynamics and strategic planning by grasping and navigating these pathways. Hence, educational practices aligned with neoliberal values ensure that *shōnen/shōjo* are conditioned to adopt the behaviours and mindsets necessary for economic productivity.

In parallel, the influence of non-formal disciplinary institutions, including *juku*, normalises a culture of self-surveillance and rivalry. Seating students by ranked order and openly displaying *hensachi* scores creates an environment where learners are continuously aware of their standing relative to their peers; this fosters a deeply ingrained competitive ethos, compelling youths to internalise the need for self-care, self-improvement, and vigilance. In highlighting Kaori’s (p. 13) assertion that “*I am... [pounds table] who I am ... So, I want to not compare ...*”, quantifying and ranking youths dehumanises them, stripping their unique identities and reducing them to data points for economic analysis (Becker, 1976; Bolten, 2021). Kaori’s resistance notwithstanding, this practice instils the neoliberal orthodoxy of gauging personal success through competitive quantifiability. From Dream (p. 31), Yuuki (p. 61), and Taiki (p. 25) viewing *juku* peers as “*rival[s]*” to Yoshiko’s (p. 27) admission that she “*would work harder*” if faced with classmates aiming for the same school, the persistent emphasis on outperforming others becomes a defining feature of this formative stage. As previously argued, however, the competitive ‘spirit of productivity’ does not simply concern academic achievement; it translates into the neoliberal expectation that individuals continuously enhance their market value and, in the context of Japanese personhood, the view of “happiness as something that comes with the strong spirit cultivated through achievement at work” (Turner, 1991, pp. 90-92). Thus, as *shōnen/shōjo* move toward self-actualisation as ‘functional grown-ups’, the accord between Japanese and neoliberal subjectivities becomes ever-more conspicuous. Traits scaffolding Confucian culture, including diligence, perseverance, accountability, and hierarchical meritocracy (Craig, 1998; Ying, 2020; Zhang et al., 2005), have integrated seamlessly with market ideals.

In critical realist terms, the ‘actual domain’, Japan’s education system, is characterised by observable practices derived from NPM, including open marketisation, structured competition and, through the economy’s ‘invisible hand’, the ‘efficient’ use of private and non-formal schooling (Lorenz, 2012). These practices manifest in the quotidian experiences of *shōnen/shōjo*, who continuously engage in a system prioritising individualism and consumerism. Conversely, by

reflecting the veiled technologies underpinning these practices—neoliberal governmentality—the ‘real domain’ comprises the social conventions, values, and expectations shaping educational experiences. Indeed, the impact on *shōnen/shōjo* within these domains is profound and multifaceted. Through an interplay of observable practices and underlying rationalities, traditional values blend with contemporary market-driven imperatives, nudging youths to take their first steps as entrepreneurial subjects. While not *always* perceptible, these ideological currents fundamentally influence the structures and behaviours empirically observed by youths; yet, as demonstrated by Kaori, through an internal “management of possibilities”, attempts to “structure the (possible) actions of others” (Foucault, 2003, p. 138) are inevitably exercised over those capable of *resisting* attempts to regulate conduct (McKee, 2009). Friction also manifests itself in Kenji (pp. 15-16) and Hana’s (p. 37) reflections that learners study solely for exams rather than personal growth, Elisa (p. 7) and Yoshiko (p. 67) questioning the meritocratic facade of the education system, particularly *esukareitā* transitions, and Sachiko (p. 13) and Yuuki’s (p. 65) recognition of—and *adaption to*—surveillance mechanisms, such as early application deadlines and limited choice. Thus, Japan’s education system acts as a crucible where neoliberal values are not only imparted but potentially contested and negotiated. This interplay reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent to forging ‘functional grown-ups’ within a market-oriented framework. More pointedly, it highlights how *shōnen/shōjo* are not merely passive recipients of neoliberal governmentality but, consistent with Fülöp & Gordon Györi (2021, p.163), responsabilised “active agents” who navigate and sometimes contest the expectations placed upon them.

Seinen: Navigating the Intersection of Academic Capital and Brand Value

Seinen generally references young adults in their late teens to early twenties, the period spent in HE before entering the labour force as *shakaijin* (Nagasue, 2020; Roberson, 1995). In this regard, transitions to *seinen* carry the ‘baggage’ of their earlier experiences, building upon and reinforcing the neoliberal ideals and modes of governance they were exposed to as *shōnen/shōjo*. Revisiting my participants’ ongoing journeys as *seinen*, Hana (p. 87), Sachiko (p. 65), and Yoshiko (p. 76) describe the commodification of *hensachi*, an ‘objective’ metric that is at best inaccurate Yuuki (p. 66) and at worst a wilfully deceptive “*accessory*” Elisa (p. 48), used to inflate a university’s academic ‘worth’ and, in turn, cement HE as a means to an economic end. Recalling Kawanishi’s (2020) claim that *seinen* “are expected to understand and accept this double standard in many areas of life, which is subtle at times”, it becomes imperative for students to be savvy consumers, critically assessing the actual value and promises of rational educational investments. This “performance of exchange relations” (Kelly, 2006, p. 29) seeps into the fabric of interpersonal conduct; here, academic prestige is a social currency, impacting how individuals value their peers (Kaori, pp. 29-30; Sachiko, p. 55), interpersonal dynamics (Dream, p. 31), and the very bonds of friendship itself (Kenji, p. 16). As previously argued, economically rational views of friendship as contingent are precarious as they signify the embodiment of market-driven competition that has, in effect, penetrated or, calling upon a fittingly deceptive metaphor, ‘trickled down’ into everyday life. Regarding long-standing cultural norms, they *also* herald the inculcation of individualism and economic pragmatism within Japanese social harmony.

As the “*last gakureki*” (Kaori, p. 37), or final credential before *shakaijin* transitions, university degrees are perceived as obligatory (Elisa, p. 26; Kenji, p. 23; Sachiko, p. 59; Taiki, p. 45). Indeed, within Japan’s “degreeocracy” (Okada, 2001, p. 303) university study is an investment expected to yield financial stability, social status, and job security (Hana, p. 15; Kaori, p. 8; Kenji, p. 7; Sachiko, p. 37) consonant with the college’s respective prestige; as such, “*it’s not an exaggeration to say, gakureki makes our life.*” (Taiki, p. 14). Internalised surveillance and fear of judgment for possessing low-prestige credentials (Elisa, p. 8) begets self-regulation and conformity, fostering a climate prioritising individual success over harmonious social equity. One may view pivots to individualism in Hana’s (p. 72) interpretation of credentialism as “*appreciated*” (while conceding, “*if I didn’t go to Western-U, I would be so angry.*”) and Kaori’s (p. 56) “*fortunately, I have good gakureki, so...*”. I will address the social implications of hyper-competitive individualism shortly; for now, one should understand that such mindsets are not simply reactions to academic prestige-grading, but an intensification of the entrepreneurial subjectivity initiated as *shōnen/shōjo*. While this earlier phase instilled the need for competitive self-management and strategic planning, *seinen* evolve into more complex, self-sustaining, and economically oriented projects. Here, learners not only navigate the competitive educational landscape but actively engage in the self-branding and market positioning deemed crucial for vocational success (Gershon, 2016): “*If I graduated from this uni, I would, like, get a good career... like... it’s all connected to my future.*” (Sachiko, p. 37); “*To work in a company... famous or popular companies ... we MUST get into the university.*” (Dream, p. 49).

However, neoliberal self-branding draws our gaze to regional disparities in education and employment. Yuuki (p. 56), Yoshiko (p. 46), Dream (p. 73), Kenji (pp. 25-26), and Sachiko (p. 51) express concerns about the limited recognition of Western-U outside of Kansai, with Taiki (p. 11) initially regretting his decision to attend the university due to its perceived lower prestige compared to colleges in Tokyo. Again, these examples underscore HE as a rational economic investment; more pointedly, the pressure to attend ‘élite’ HEIs heightens self-surveillance among *seinen*, who, in tying self-esteem to educational and vocational ‘worth’, constantly “estimate, calculate, measure, evaluate, discipline, and judge” (Cruikshank, 1996, p. 233). The taken-for-granted truth or ‘natural order’ of Tokyo as superior prompts *seinen* to self-regulate their conduct in the “endless attempt to approximate the normal” (Oksala, 2011, p. 89), intersecting with neoliberalism’s “art of governing” (Rose et al., 2006, p. 3) and underscoring how its mechanisms of power subtly nudge *seinen* toward specific conduct and self-conceptions. Consolidating the above within a critical realist approach, *seinen* observe and navigate an actual domain upholding rational economic practice, including prestige hierarchies, self-branding, and self-regulation. Simultaneously, the real domain’s underlying governmentality permeates their subjective experiences, as demonstrated in, among other quotes, Elisa’s (p. 8) anxiety over low *gakureki* and Hana (p. 72) and Kaori’s (p. 56) strategic appreciation of credentialism. Consequently, *seinen* marks a pivotal intermediate stage between the formative *shōnen/shōjo* and the forthcoming *shakaijin* transition, wherein credentialed entrepreneurial projects develop into the ‘functional grown-ups’ expected to navigate and reproduce the neoliberal values, norms, and structures governing them (Freeland, 1996).

Shakaijin: Realising ‘Functional’ Homo Œconomicus

The culmination of the biographical neoliberal project, where, as ‘fully-fledged’ and ‘functional’ members of society (Nagasue, 2020; Uehara, 2016), entrepreneurial subjects cultivated throughout the educational journey emerge as *shakaijin*. Against this background, the education system’s role in shaping youths as *homo Œconomicus* becomes ever-more conspicuous, emphasising individual responsibility for skill acquisition and market adaptability (Gershon, 2011). Reflecting linguistic entrepreneurialism (De Costa et al., 2021), the participants’ focus on English proficiency and global readiness (Elisa, p. 39; Kenji, p. 5; Sachiko, p. 34; Taiki, p. 37) highlights their perceived importance as strategic investments for future employability. As ‘functional grown-ups’, TGUP⁴³ graduates are positioned to leverage their accumulated skills to transition “into positions of global leadership” (Maruko, 2014), aligning with the neoliberal commodification of English skills (Dubin, 2023; Samuell, 2024b). The testimonies of Taiki (p. 36) and Kenji (p. 45), who view English mastery as critical for standing out among *shūkatsu*⁴⁴ rivals, illustrate how linguistic capital intersects with vocational aspirations. Indeed, Taiki’s (pp. 18-19) assertion that mastering English enhances his competitiveness reflects a deep-seated belief in the language’s utility for professional advancement. This perspective is not isolated but shared by Dream (p. 58), Taiki (p. 36), and Yuuki (p. 50), who rationalise English as a prerequisite for global engagement in the corporate sector.

Furthermore, the internalisation of market values, including self-discipline, perseverance, strategic self-investment, and quantifiability, is evident in the participants’ approach to learning English. Examples include Elisa’s (p. 11) relentless efforts to pass the Eiken standardised test and Kaori’s (p. 12) *kejime*-derived discipline to improve her English score despite lacking motivation. Such behaviours underscore the neoliberal emphasis on individual accountability and melioristic self-improvement. Drives to enhance self-marketability through skill enhancement also reflect a broader societal expectation that *homo Œconomicus* proactively manage their human capital to align with market demands (Gershon, 2011; Okura Gagné, 2020). Hence, the transition to *shakaijin* concerns securing potentially lifelong employment (Kawanishi, 2020) and realising the entrepreneurial subjectivity ingrained throughout one’s biographical project. Hana’s (p. 62) admission that she learns English “because the company requires it” and Kenji (p. 36, p. 45), who strategically showcases his language proficiency and experiences during *shūkatsu*, understand the practical applications of linguistic entrepreneurialism; in essence, the capacity to self-market and present themselves as valuable assets through language skills. As such, *shūkatsu* imposes a rigorous framework of rules, hierarchy, and intense competition, which pressures *seinen* to conform to corporate expectations. *Shūkatsu* regulates job hunters, perpetuating a cycle of conformity by normalising the ‘requirement’ for specific profiles; Japan’s cultural imperative for rule compliance and in-group harmony (Dore & Sako, 1998; Zhang et al., 2005) accelerates this process, leading to a perceived lack of independence among *seinen*. While Sachiko (p. 49) highlights the paradox of ‘having an opinion’ in a job market that claims a preference for autonomy yet penalises individuality (Rear, 2016), Elisa (p. 64), Hana (p. 92), Taiki (p. 75), and Yuuki (p.

⁴³ Top Global University Project

⁴⁴ ‘Job-hunting’

69) express concerns about the need to prioritise company profits and suppress individuality: “people who listen and obey, just say ‘yes’ people, can get the job” (Yoshiko (p. 58).

Returning to my (much) earlier claim that neoliberalism consumes positive freedom by subordinating subjects to enterprise, participant testimony indicates that *shakaijin* are reduced to “cogs in neoliberalism’s internal machinery who often lack autonomy” (Telford & Briggs, 2022, p. 64). This instrumentalisation (and, thus, *dehumanisation*) of prospective employees also results in a disconnect between academic performance and corporate reality. Here, Elisa (p. 38), Kaori (p. 57), Kenji (p. 42), Taiki (pp. 50-51), Yoshiko (p. 60), and Yuuki (p. 57) support Kawanishi’s (2020) depiction of *shūkatsu* as a “crude social deception” that prioritises institutional prestige over individual academic excellence, thereby undermining the supposed purpose of HE. While Japanese education emphasises quantifiability through *hensachi* and language scores (Jones, 2019; Smith, 2021), corporate Japan’s disregard for GPA highlights a critical tension in its *gakureki shakai*: the labour market’s emphasis on institutional prestige over individual merit commodifies applicants within a corporate-driven system. Specifically, this practice strips away the uniqueness and personal achievements of *seinen* while fostering a culture of conformity that discourages diversity of experience. Perhaps more importantly, it reduces one’s ‘worth’ to a mere statistic or checkbox in the recruitment process: “Companies choose people, by their, you know, *gakureki*. They only focus on which universities they graduated from ... they don’t even read [applications] ... if we don’t graduate good university.” (Taiki, p. 10). Essentially, you are not the sum of your parts but those of your alma mater. Reducing *seinen* to mere ‘cogs’ induces strategic performativity to stand out against *shūkatsu* rivals. Quotes offered by Hana (p. 91), Kaori (p. 77), and Taiki (p. 47) reflect a deep comprehension of the need to project and “maintain a positive image of productivity and resourcefulness” (Ong & Combinido, 2018, p.95) to potential employers, even by overstating skills or engaging in “bullshit” (Yuuki, p. 69).

As emphasised throughout this chapter, *shakaijin* represents the culmination of the institutionalised entrepreneurial project, whereby social adolescents emerge as ‘fully-fledged’, ‘functional’ adults (Nagasue, 2020; Uehara, 2016). From the initial *shōnen/shōjo*, making strategic choices to navigate competitive educational environments, to self-branding and market positioning as *seinen*, the journey towards *shakaijin* reflects neoliberal rationalities woven throughout the very fabric of Japan’s ‘degreeocracy’ (Amano, 1997; Okada, 2001). Indeed, per observable events and experiences in the empirical domain, the emphasis on productivity, market adaptability, institutional prestige, and self-branding among participants reflects the strategies and techniques employed by disciplinary institutions to govern subjects (Foucault, 1995). Within the actual domain, learner testimonies draw our gaze to Japan’s NPM-derived education system, including the pressure to integrate market-oriented skills within one’s entrepreneurial project, the strategic self-presentation required in job applications, and the overwhelming focus on institutional prestige over individual performance. Finally, within the real domain, we confront the structures and discourses undergirding neoliberal governmentality, including reducing human capital to the sum of its alma maters, prioritising market values over individual well-being, and normalising hierarchal meritocracy. Against this background, *shakaijin*, as the culmination of the neoliberal institutional biography (Kelly, 2006)—as the realisation of *seinen* as “functional ‘grown-ups’” (Uehara, 2016)—marks the critical juncture in Japanese personhood where, as *homo oeconomicus*,

subjects become active participants in a taken-for-granted neoliberal order, feeding into the very structures that govern them (Foucault, 1980).

Epilogue: Placing Japanese Personhood in the ‘Bigger Picture’

Seeking to address this project’s ‘golden thread’, or how, through the technologies and rationalities upholding neoliberal governance, Japan’s education system reforges youths as *entrepreneurial projects*, I interpret the *shōnen/shōjo*, *seinen*, and *shakaijin* phases of Japanese personhood as constituting a market-oriented “institutionalised biography (Childhood—Youth—Adulthood)” (Kelly, 2006, p. 18). In doing so, I explore how neoliberal governmentality interweaves with the very fabric of Japanese society. The market emphasis on self-sufficiency, self-marketing, savvy consumerism, quantifiability, and hyper-competition permeates Japanese education and school-to-work transitions. *Shōnen/shōjo* are initiated as entrepreneurial projects, exploiting private education and value-added options to secure ‘élite’ education. *Seinen*, in turn, internalise the necessity of self-branding and market positioning to secure vocational success, navigating regional disparities and conforming to corporate expectations. Finally, when readying for *shakaijin* transitions, subjects take in the full impact of neoliberal governmentality, wherein their ‘worth’ reduces to alma mater prestige and the capacity to present strategically during *shūkatsu*. Accordingly, journeys through Japanese personhood reflect a neoliberal reimagining, where youths transition from ‘incomplete’ children to ‘fully-fledged’ and ‘functional’ adults.

Gakureki as a Neoliberal Technology of Power

The realisation of ‘valid’ knowledge, *gakureki*, is central to Japan’s production of ‘calculable’ and ‘docile’ bodies. While the previous section highlights entrepreneurial subjectivities as institutional biographical projects (Kelly, 2006), encompassing the *shōnen/shōjo*, *seinen*, and *shakaijin* stages of personhood, *gakureki* regulates the entire process, embedding the traits associated with ‘functional’ human capital, *homo oeconomicus*. Through formal and non-formal education, disciplinary institutions subject learners to panoptic surveillance, wherein hyper-competition and self-regulation emerge as the norm. Pressure to achieve the ‘correct’ form of *gakureki* at “the ‘right’ institution” (Ball et al., 2002, p. 342) fosters a culture of quantification wherein learners are openly monitored and ranked against their peers. Dream (p. 31), Hana (p. 31), Kenji (p. 14), Taiki (p. 25), and Yuuki (p. 61), for example, exhibit internalised competitiveness, reducing classmates to ‘rivals’ and how, through the public display of their grades, they are pressured to excel academically: “So... it’s kind of pressure. Everybody thinks that if I’m... the front student. I’m not, you know... good at... a test.” (Elisa, p. 15). As the manifestation of measurable academic performance—or “how smart the person is or how smart the school or university is” (Kenji, p. 59)—quantification naturally leads to *hensachi*. Despite their critiques, Dream (p. 84), Elisa (p. 47), and Taiki (p. 14) describe how, as a ‘productive’ and ‘powerful’ force, *hensachi* compels learners to take accountability, exert effort, and accept themselves as ‘works in progress’: “If you want to try hard and study hard, you can, like, go for the higher *hensachi* uni ... Realise where you are” (Sachiko, p. 64). Here, self-regulation, discipline, and conformity conducive to market productivity take hold.

As noted by Amano (1997, p. 56), Japan is not as “a ‘what level’ credentialing society so much as a ‘what institution’ credentialing society”, wherein attending college is not necessarily an

agentive choice but an unsolicited social contract shaped by entrenched cultural norms. This position is substantiated by Elisa (p. 26), Kenji (p. 23), Taiki (p. 35), and, perhaps most strikingly, Sachiko (p. 59), who claimed, “*I don’t think we had a decision not to go to uni... like, even if it’s not Western-U. It was like already set... like, it was decided.*” The perceived duty to attend college, regardless of personal interest, underscores the instrumentalisation of HE as a means to an economic end (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020), reinforcing a Beckerian (1976) logic whereby ‘rational units’ of *homo æconomicus* continuously invest in their human capital to secure upward social mobility. The connection between *gakureki* and vocational success permeates the results chapter, with the meritocratic promise of “*a higher salary in the future.*” (Kaori, p. 8) fostering self-discipline, self-surveillance, and competitiveness. More pointedly, by tying learners to education’s “economic empirical base” (Brancaleone & O’Brien, 2011, p. 517), the system and the subject are similarly commodified: “credentialism becomes inherent in the system: the more credentials possessed in the shape of certificates and degrees, the more marketable the individual” (Patrick, 2013, p. 3). However, in doing so, Japan’s hyper-competitive academic and vocational domains reinforce narrow individualism, repositioning success as social currency (cultural capital) and, as previously discussed, impacting perceptions of the self and peers predicated on *gakureki*.

Kenji’s (p. 16) admission that his perception of friends would “*change a lot*” based on their superior academic achievements reflects the instrumentalisation of relationships through individualistic hyper-competition. By encouraging entrepreneurial mindsets, wherein subjects are active agents in their success, *gakureki* induces self-regulation and self-optimisation; however, as demonstrated here and supported by Dream (p. 31) and Kaori (pp. 29-39), the race for the ‘right kind’ of credentials potentially erodes social harmony and collective well-being. Indeed, Sachiko’s (p. 15) emphasis on “*choos[ing] that line*” to secure one’s future underscores the intense pressure and strain that *gakureki* places on *seinen*, with the focus on success at all costs potentially leading to feelings of envy (Sachiko, p. 55), rivalry, (Kaori, pp. 29-30), unease (Dream, p. 31), and even resentment (Kenji, p. 16). Social anxiety, in turn, begets introspection, with the top-down hegemony of the State making way for a more authentic realisation of, and ‘care’ for, the self. In doing so, subjects conform to the norms of neoliberal institutions within the ‘credential society’ (Amano, 1997), wherein all aspects of their environment, including the bonds of friendship, take on an economic dimension (Becker et al., 2021). By invoking the rational self-interest indicative of *homo æconomicus*, *gakureki* renders subjects both ‘docile’ and ‘calculable’ (Foucault, 1995). The result is an enterprise society wherein social value is measured against one’s credentialed resources, maintaining a cycle of self-discipline and wilful productivity.

Hence, as a technology of power, *gakureki* interweaves with the social fabric of status, opportunity, and success (Nam, 2022), with learner testimony underscoring the essentiality of this relationship to Japanese society. Of this study’s nine participants, almost all, Dream (p. 14), Hana (p. 15), Elisa (p. 8), Kaori (p. 56), Kenji (p. 7), Sachiko (p. 37), Taiki (p. 14), and Yuuki (p. 56), tie *gakureki* explicitly to social and professional standing. For instance, Taiki’s (p. 14) admission that “*Gakureki is powerful. Because, like I said ... we have to graduate from a great university*” demonstrates the normalisation of academic credentials as synonymous with success, while Elisa’s (p. 8) fear of judgement and Hana’s (p. 72) claim that she would be “*so angry*” if possessing a lower *gakureki* underscoring the emotional weight and personal investment *seinen* place on their

market positioning ahead of *shakaijin* transitions. By arbitrating ‘valid’ knowledge and conduct within the power-knowledge nexus, *gakureki* limits and produces, serving as an “*obstacle*” (Elisa, p. 37) for those without marketable academic backgrounds and incentivising *seinen* to “*work for it*” (Sachiko, p. 55) in governmentality’s established power structures. Accordingly, subjects are works-in-progress, strategically managing their education to maximise economic returns: “*I want to work in a big company, and almost every company has gakureki filter. So... I wanted to go to Western-U.*” (Hana, p. 15).

While *gakureki* is synonymous with prestige-graded credentialism, ‘academic background’ provides a more accurate translation. As such, *gakureki* incorporates the skills and competencies requisite to market performativity, including English proficiency, itself rationalised through “neoliberal discourses [which] emphasize that it is the responsibility of the individual to acquire the information and skills, including communication or language ability, that are considered important for the new knowledge economy” (Horiguchi et al., 2015, p. 3). Observing Taiki’s (pp. 18-19) claim that “*Compared to [shūkatsu competitors], I have a gakureki and, also, I can study better than them. So, I thought it was great for me to master English,*” language incorporates within a broader, self-regulated entrepreneurial project. Additionally, recalling his decision to attend an international school, Kenji’s (p. 5) determination to prioritise the quality of English instruction highlights him as an embedded chooser, with his “deep grammar of aspiration” (Ball et al., 2002, p. 337) reflecting not only the practicality of language in a globalised society but a proactive approach to career development. He recognises the importance of language skills and a competitive spirit of productivity for job hunting: “*I can be competitive when I talk about language skills... about how much I put effort to reach the goal... [I compete with] basically anyone who wants... to be working at the company ... that I want to be working at.*” (Kenji, p. 45). Dream (p. 58), Hana (p. 62), Taiki (p. 36), and Yuuki (p. 50), too, reflexively manage their English skills to strengthen their vocational prospects, showcasing their willingness and capacity to steer their *gakureki* within the knowledge economy.

English is not merely a depoliticised and decontextualised ‘tool’ (Dubin, 2023; Samuell, 2024b) but an exercise in self-branding and self-positioning within the neoliberal hierarchy, affording participants a greater chance of satiating Japan’s professed need for “trustworthy global citizens” (Fritz & Murao, 2020, p. 520): “*At least [global workers] have to speak English.*” (Dream, p. 58); “*English is necessary for me because I want to work globally.*” (Taiki, p. 36). Pressures to conform to corporate expectations for the ‘right kind’ of human capital highlight *gakureki*’s role in the power-knowledge nexus. Additionally, recognising the need for performativity during *shūkatsu* (the arbiter of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ *gakureki*), including “*tell[ing] a lie*” (Hana, p. 91), giving the “*correct answer*” (Kaori, p. 77), “*show[ing] yourself*” (Taiki, p. 47), and engaging in “*bullshit*” (Yuuki, p. 69), during job interviews indicates a willingness to conform as ‘functional’ *homo oeconomicus*’ predilection for self-marketing and the Japanese cultural emphasis on “idealized self-presentation” (Johnson, 1995, p. 246). Taken in aggregate, this section attests to *gakureki* as a technology of power, wherein ‘calculable’ subjects remain acutely aware of their social positioning and economic potential. Through pervasive disciplinary mechanisms, *gakureki* underscores power-knowledge’s mutually reinforcing relationship, whereby the market champions the sovereignty of self-regulating human capital. However, by ‘accepting the reality’

(Becker, 1976) of Japan's enterprise ontology, whereby conduct is regulated and modified to appease neoliberal demands, subjects willfully respond "to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment" (Foucault, 2008, p. 270). They are, by definition, *docile*.

"It's Gonna be a Bad... Effect": Pivoting to Individualism and Reproducing Hierarchy

As highlighted throughout this chapter, learners navigate a heavily privatised free-market system normalising individualism, self-regulation, and hyper-competition, aligning their conduct with neoliberal conceptions of productivity and success (Telford & Briggs, 2022). To Dream (p. 20), Elisa (p. 24), and Taiki (p. 32), the distinction between 'limited' public and 'special' or 'unique' private schooling is crucial, with the latter offering a breadth of tailored experiences, value-added options, and, more importantly, transitions, including *suisen* and *esukareitā* pathways. Accordingly, the strategic decision-making evidenced by Hana (p. 51), Kaori (pp. 36-37), Kenji (p. 24), Yoshiko (p. 71), and Yuuki (p. 11) to access such schools reflects a broader trend of navigating institutional hierarchies to maximise one's economic utility. More pointedly, Taiki's (p. 30) admission that "*Most people can't take the system because some families don't have enough money to do that.*" and Yuuki's (p. 7) labelling of his *esukareitā* school as "*very expensive*" demonstrate an awareness of their pathways reinforcing inequality. However, it also speaks to private schools catering to market demands by equipping 'embedded choosers' with (yet more) competitive advantage ahead of *shūkatsu*. Contrary to the bootstraps logic of meritocratic reward, the system, by its very existence, prioritises 'winners'—"conceptualised by the free market paradigm as those with access to substantial financial resources" (Costas-Battle, 2017, p. 218)—at the expense of 'losers' from less-affluent backgrounds. Moreover, Elisa (p. 7), Sachiko (p. 59), Taiki (p. 31), and Yoshiko (p. 67) highlight complacency arising from what are, essentially, guaranteed progressions. In this regard, self-regulation manifests as a diminished motivation to excel; privileged students have internalised and normalised the truth that 'élite' education is assured, thereby exhibiting a reduced agency when consolidating their entrepreneurial projects.

Consequently, while the system privileges *esukareitā* and, to a lesser yet still significant degree, *suisen* learners, it also operates through coercion, nudging their conduct towards the 'right kind' of institutionalised biography; they have been managed "at a distance" (Rose, 2000, p. 323). However, the disciplinary techniques exerted by these institutions are, at times, more explicit, extending to contrived early application deadlines (Kenji, p. 57; Yuuki, p. 65) and constraints on applying to universities outside of the corporate umbrella (Kenji, p. 26; Sachiko, p. 13). This narrowing of options highlights an illusion of choice and the underlying power structures governing educational outcomes, benefiting the privileged while rendering them docile (Foucault, 2008). Indeed, the testimonies of Kenji (p. 58), Sachiko (pp. 63-64) and Yuuki (p. 41) mark an explicit connection between 'élite' schooling and "the production of nobility" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 73), whereby a systematic emphasis on autonomous self-regulation and the development of market-oriented skills shape students as *homo aeconomicus*, bestowing a competitive advantage ahead of the school-to-work transition: "*in shakaijin life, that's really something you need.*" (Yuuki, p. 41). Naturally, no discussion on Japanese educational inequity would be complete without examining *juku*, shadow education institutions "advantage[ing] their customers when sitting university entrance examinations, allowing them to, in effect, pay for an increased chance

of gaining access to prestigious HEIs” (Samuell, 2024a, p. 46). The testimonies of Elisa (p. 17), Kaori (p. 27), and Sachiko (p. 28) highlight the economic disparities inherent to shadow education, with its associated expenses limiting opportunities to bridge a socio-economic divide exacerbated by hyper-competition and intense pressure to succeed: “*Yeah, it's kind of unfair. For, ahh... like, not rich family... to go to juku.*” (Elisa, p. 17).

The draw of *juku*, of course, is to improve one’s *hensachi*, the deviation value used to quantify, or ‘compare’ and ‘categorise’ (Kaori, pp. 13-72), a learner’s academic ‘worth’. Dream (p. 84), too, notes that *hensachi* “*has a really strong power for the students that are really, really working hard to get into the university,*” with a high *hensachi* filtering prospective learners to appropriately-levelled colleges. However, the nation’s 50,000 *juku* (Entrich, 2018) do not simply advantage customers in test preparation and performance; they better instil a competitive ethos aligning with *homo oeconomicus*, whereby subjects internalise the self-discipline and self-regulation requisite to melioristic improvement. In doing so, students view success as resulting from individual effort and diligence, inducing entrepreneurial selfhood where they continuously strive to improve under market-like conditions. Narratives of competing with rivals (Hana, p. 31; Taiki, p. 25; Yoshiko, p. 27; Yuuki, p. 61) reflect narrow individualism, whereby quantifiable performance overshadows relationships. Here, ranked seating orders and public displays of *hensachi* scores (Dream, p. 15; Elisa, p. 15; Taiki, p. 72; Yoshiko, pp. 81-82) serve as mechanisms of normalisation and control, reinforcing self-improvement and competitiveness as necessary for success. More critically, hyper-competition born of the *hensachi-juku* duology embeds a zero-sum mindset where one’s gain is another’s loss: “*...even the next rival who is sitting in the next chair. They, you know, he’s... competition... a competitor for me. So, I studied a lot. I tried to study hard as I can.*” (Taiki, p. 25). Predicated on separating ‘winners’ from ‘losers’ in a survival-of-the-fittest social arena, Japanese shadow education lends credence to Giroux’s (2014, p. 1) claim that neoliberalism’s ‘war’ on education “privileges personal responsibility over larger social forces”.

Recalling Taiki’s (p. 14) claim that “*it’s not an exaggeration to say, gakureki makes our life*” alongside Kenji’s (p. 7) reflection that “*without going to university, it’s almost impossible to get a good... great job,*” *gakureki* begets self-regulation whereby conduct aligns with expectations for credentialed human resources. Indeed, these statements, coupled with testimony from Hana (p. 15) and Sachiko (p. 37), reveal the normalisation of educational attainment as the primary, if not sole, pathway to economic success and social validation. However, while academics have long proclaimed Japan a meritocratic ‘degreeocracy’ (Fujita, 2000; Okada, 2001), persistent household investment in education reinforces stratification, with merit inextricably linked to one’s inherited means. Elisa (p. 8), Hana (p. 18), Kenji (p. 14), Yoshiko (p. 11), and Yuuki (p. 34), for example, highlight education as systematically reproducing social hierarchies, with Kenji (p. 14) noting that “*it’s gonna be a bad... effect*” on those lacking the resources to succeed. However, despite acknowledging the inequities inherent to the system, participants actively and pragmatically navigate these disparities, understanding the benefits of aligning with market norms by leveraging their credentialed resources for personal gain: “*Like, I have a Western-U-graduated filter, so, I think... that’s... good*” (Sachiko, p. 49); “*I have a good influence because I go to this school*” (Elisa, p. 8). Despite recognising socio-economic stratification as “*bad*” (Kenji, p. 14; Yoshiko,

p. 11), “*systematic*” (Yuuki, p. 34), and a “*problem*” (Hana, p. 18), the absence of advocacy for change reflects a narrow, self-centric focus over broader social issues (Bourdieu, 1998).

Of course, it is not my intention to paint these learners in a negative light, merely to highlight how, through the internalisation of hyper-competition, participant testimonies reflect the belief that neoliberal governmentality reimagines the very purpose of education and, indeed, personhood “largely autonomously, into meanings that are structured by the market form” (Kelly, 2006, p. 24). Pressures faced by *seinen* to acquire the ‘right kind’ of *gakureki* cumulate throughout their entrepreneurial projects and previous development stages. In terms of English proficiency, subjects align their entrepreneurial projects with market demands, including investing considerable effort, passion, and resilience in learning English (Elisa, p. 11; Kaori, p. 12; Yoshiko, p. 40), showcasing these abilities as a self-branding exercise (Hana, p. 62; Yuuki, p. 50), and framing their proficiency as a competitive advantage during *shūkatsu* (Kenji, p. 45; Taiki, pp. 18-19). Such approaches to language acquisition are not inherently harmful but reflect neoliberalism’s pervasive and stratifying authority within education. Through the power-knowledge nexus, English proficiency enhances economic success and social status, reinforcing hierarchies based on linguistic capital and underscoring the instrumentalisation of the education system and subject (Patrick, 2013). Recalling Han’s (2017, p. 28) claim that, by self-commodifying under market conditions, subjects engage “in auto-exploitation willingly—and even passionately”, the dedication exhibited by learners in acquiring English, showcasing their language abilities, and framing proficiency as a means of securing vocational success are manifestations of affective labour. This emotional attachment to language proficiency—“*English! English! Is... it totally matters...*” (Elisa, p. 39); “*I’ve spent... much effort to learn English.*” (Yoshiko, p. 40)—further highlights the ‘affective regime of truth’ of English enhancing competitiveness and, more pointedly, the stratification of opportunities based on linguistic capital.

Following my earlier claim that Japan’s deregulated and decentralised English education sector “strengthens hierarchical interactions between the privileged ‘haves’ conditioned to recognize the capital and value of English and those ‘have nots’ disadvantaged in cultural, social, and economic capital” (Smith, 2021, p. 1671), the emphasis on individual skill-development and market competitiveness further reinforces personal gain over broader social concerns and social harmony. Indeed, in seeking to exploit English to overcome faceless and hypothetical *shūkatsu* competitors, Kenji (p. 45) and Taiki (pp. 18-19), in particular, reflect the market’s preference for narrow individualism. Manifesting here as English proficiency, yet broadly representative of neoliberalism’s commodification of *all* ‘valid’ knowledge within its ostensibly ‘meritocratic’ market economy, the repositioning of education as a survival-of-the-fittest social arena is, perhaps, the most “corrosive” (Costas Battle, 2019, p. 419) feature of neoliberalism. However, while predicated on filtering the ‘strong’ from the ‘weak’, ‘deserving’ from the ‘undeserving’, and ‘winners’ from ‘losers’, it is also essential to recognise that, as a correlate of normalisation and control, governmentality enthrals the wealthy and deprived alike within its grasp. For, “meritocracy entices an anxious and inauthentic elite into a pitiless, lifelong contest to secure income and status through its own excessive industry” (Markovits, 2019, 1-2).

Chapter Conclusion

Focusing on the ‘bigger picture’, I discussed the meanings and implications of my results for Japanese society based on the research question: *How does Japan’s enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?* Seeking to explore how the enterprise society reimagines youths as ‘functional’ neoliberal subjects, *homo oeconomicus*, in terms of the transition points marking Japanese personhood, I first organised around three phases of development: *shōnen/shōjo* (youth), *seinen* (social adolescence), and *shakaijin* (social adulthood). Through private education, self-optimisation, and strategic planning, *shōnen/shōjo* internalise the need to navigate and succeed in the market economy. This shift to entrepreneurial selfhood continues through university, where, by engaging in self-branding and market positioning to secure desired credentials and vocational outcomes, *seinen* evolve into more complex, self-sustaining, and economically oriented projects. The culmination of this process is seen in their transition to *shakaijin*, of ‘fully-fledged’ adults (Nagasue, 2020), where ‘worth’ reduces to the prestige of one’s alma mater and the capacity to “obey” (Yoshiko, p. 58) corporate expectations. In doing so, positive freedom is forfeited.

Placing *gakureki*, or credentialism, within the power-knowledge nexus, I next discussed how, as a neoliberal technology of power, Japan’s ‘credential society’ reinforces dominant power structures and social hierarchies. By controlling ‘valid’ knowledge and ‘acceptable’ conduct, the intense competition brought about by Japan’s *gakureki shakai* creates a culture of self-surveillance and quantification. Hence, knowledge’s co-constitutive, productive relation with power instils the traits necessary for economic productivity. In doing so, however, *gakureki* interweaves with the social fabric of status, opportunity, and success (Nam, 2022), fostering self-discipline and competitiveness while commodifying education and the very bonds of friendship. Finally, I unveiled the socio-economic inequalities shaping entrepreneurial subjectivity under neoliberal governmentality. In a highly stratified education system privileging those with the financial resources to succeed, participant testimony further highlighted the normalisation of competition, the commodification of education, and the role of credentials in accessing economic opportunities. Focusing on English proficiency as a marketable skill also underscores neoliberalism’s influence on education, perpetuating hierarchies and reinforcing individualism over collective well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

Chapter Introduction

Adopting a critical realist stance premised on ontological realism and epistemological relativism and operationalised through interpretative phenomenological analysis; I drew upon Foucauldian (2008) governmentality to explore the impact of Japan's enterprise society on the ongoing entrepreneurial projects of nine students enrolled in a Top Global University Project college. Given Kelly's (2006, p. 18) reading of entrepreneurial selfhood constituting "an institutionalised biography (Childhood—Youth—Adulthood)", Japan's enduring (and *pre-neoliberal*) biographical transition points (*shōnen/shōjo—seinen—shakaijin*) present natural junctures through which to frame an idiographic exploration of the neoliberal subject-as-project. As highlighted previously, scant literature explores first-hand accounts of Japanese entrepreneurial subjectivity, a gap that I sought to bridge via the following research question:

How does Japan's enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of students at a Top Global University Project college?

In this final chapter, I answer the above question before presenting my project's key 'take-home' messages. Following this, the implications of this research will be highlighted, including recommendations for educational policy and practice and suggestions for future research. Next, I will reflect upon this thesis' limitations before concluding with my final thoughts.

Answering the Research Question

As emphasised throughout this thesis, governmentality permeates Japanese education. In a system following "the logic of neoliberalism and New Public Management" (Bjork, 2015, p. 26), decentralisation, deregulation, and open-marketisation function in concert to reinforce hyper-competitive credentialism, or *gakureki*, as an immutable feature of Japanese society. As part of the Confucian tradition of fostering "talent and virtue as the key argument for a hierarchical meritocracy" (Ying, 2020, p. 1017), however, *gakureki* pre-dates Japanese inflexions with economic liberalisation. One can thereby argue that *gakureki* has, in effect, been appropriated, perhaps even hijacked, by neoliberal governmentality to secure market ideals within Japanese personhood. The pervasive nature of Japan's 'degreeocracy' (Okada, 2001), where prestige-graded credentials dictate not only one's educational and vocational trajectories but determine one's 'worth' to society (Smith, 2021), reflects a deep cultural entrenchment of neoliberal values, where subjects are optimised to meet market demands. In this regard, *gakureki* serves as a technology of power, with Foucault's (1980, 1995) power-knowledge nexus underscoring the governmental techniques, including surveillance, quantification, and academic hierarchies, collectively shaping Japanese conduct and aspirations. Here, *gakureki* operates through coercion, nudging subjects towards self-actualisation as entrepreneurial *homo oeconomicus*; it is, by definition, a mechanism for managing populations.

Recalling Foucault's (2008, p. 147) interpretation of the *enterprise society* as one "regulated by reference to the market ... a society subject to the dynamic of competition", we come to understand that Japan's *gakureki shakai* and enterprise society are essentially synonymous. At every significant milestone of Japanese personhood, from youthful *shōnen/shōjo* to adolescent *seinen* and, ultimately, mature *shakaijin*, the technologies of self-evaluation, self-regulation, and self-normalisation converge to produce 'calculable' subjects at once disciplined yet concurrently 'docile' to the neoliberal rationalities governing conduct (Foucault, 1995). Individuals that "have been seduced by their own perceived powers of freedom and have, at the same time, let go of significant collective powers" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249). However, shifts toward economic self-interest, defined by Bourdieu (1998) as pivots to individualism, raise questions on the broader consequences of competitive self-management, with the entanglement of *gakureki* and neoliberalism extending to personal relations, values, and aspirations. In sum, how does Japan's enterprise society govern the lifelong entrepreneurial projects of TGUP students? Through a highly commodified and instrumentalised education system emphasising strategic decision-making, intense competition, credentialism, and the cultivation of marketable skills and mindsets, ultimately shaping "'children' who lack essential social know-how" into self-regulating, economically rational "functional 'grown-ups'" (Uehara, 2016) who are better placed to navigate, succeed in, and, more crucially, reproduce neoliberalism's survival-of-the-fittest social arena.

The 'Take-Home' Message

My 'take-home' message concerns the gradual intensification of Japanese entrepreneurial subjectivities that, in turn, encourage self-interest. From childhood, an emphasis on competition, self-discipline, and strategic decision-making within an NPM-derived education system rationalises personal optimisation and responsabilisation. This conditioning of *shōnen/shōjo* as market entities ties value to their demonstrable academic achievements, fostering a culture where individualism enhances economic outcomes. As youths transition into social adolescence, *seinen*, their preoccupation with prestige, self-branding, and market value deepens. Pursuing study at brand-name colleges for strategic positioning within the labour market becomes paramount, further reinforcing the rational conviction that credentials determine one's 'worth'. Regional disparities in opportunities and outcomes also underscore market pragmatism, reinforcing the link between one's personal 'brand' and economic imperatives. As *seinen* prepare to enter Japan's enterprise society as 'functional' *shakaijin*, the normalisation of entrepreneurial values, including market adaptability, self-discipline, and self-presentation, is realised. *Shūkatsu*, Japan's hyper-competitive graduate recruitment process, further emphasises the commodification of both the subject and the educational system, reducing applicants to the sum of their alma mater and pressuring them to obey corporate norms. In doing so, *shakaijin* are simultaneously dehumanised as data points and "cogs in neoliberalism's internal machinery" (Telford & Briggs, 2022, p. 64).

Throughout this process, the Confucian axioms traditionally upholding Japan's social fabric—productivity (Turner, 1991), diligence in learning (Bray & Lykins, 2012), hierarchical meritocracy (Ying, 2020), duty and culpability (Fu, 2016)—integrate with market ideology. This process demonstrates the "corrosive power of neoliberal governmentality" (Costas Batlle, 2017, p. 280); immutable features of Japanese personhood have not been displaced but reworked to

accommodate market logic. Indeed, considering *wa*, Japanese social harmony and cohesion, wherein “persons should fall into proper places and order” (Zhang et al., 2005, p. 109), one may observe how hyper-competitive individualism contributes to a perceived widening of socio-economic barriers. By promoting narrow self-interest as a pathway for ‘winners’ to achieve economic success, an intensification of entrepreneurial selfhood neglects the systematic injustices faced by disadvantaged ‘losers’, upholding cyclical inequality. More pointedly, pressures to succeed in this neoliberal game of life reposition academic prestige as a social currency, with interpersonal dynamics and the bonds of friendship contingent on economic rationalities and market positioning. Considering Japan’s enterprise society and *gakureki shakai* as analogous, it is time to illustrate the significance of my study, and to make educational policy and practice recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Significance of Study

This research enhances the literature from several perspectives. Perhaps most importantly, it addresses the previously outlined gaps in Japan-based inquiry. While several studies detail the impact of neoliberalism on Japanese education (Ogawa, 2013; Okura Gagné, 2020), this is the first to trace ongoing entrepreneurial projects (*shōnen/shōjo*→*seinen*→*shakaijin*) in terms of lived subjectivities. Franzén (2015), too, notes that governmentality suffers from a dearth of primary research. As such, I hope this study will serve as a springboard for future inquiries, including IPA-based idiographic research that, once again, remains underserved within the Foucauldian and Japanese contexts. While critical, policy-level analyses of TGUP continue to emerge (i.e., Dubin, 2023; Rose & McKinley, 2018; Samuell, 2024b; Smith, 2022b), this is, at the time of writing, the first project to engage in *how* students secure admission to said institutions and, perhaps more pointedly, highlight the capacity of wealthy families to exploit this system to gain access to prestigious colleges. Given neoliberalism reduces socio-economic disadvantage to an issue of self-care—“there is no such thing as society but only individuals” (Thatcher in Harvey, 2005)—the interplay between Foucault’s (1982) art of governance (real), institutional practice (actual), and individual experience (empirical) provides a nuanced analysis of the systemic barriers that contribute to stratification. Indeed, recalling the nested reality and intrinsic emancipatory role at the heart of Bhaskar’s (1986) critical realism, I hope this thesis’ joint lens provides impetus for novel methodological adaptations. My use of Foucault highlighted the processes by which norms and truth embed beyond learner perception. In drawing on Bhaskar, meanwhile, I sought “to explain and critique social conditions” (Fletcher, 2017, p. 191) by uncovering the structures sustaining governmentality. By placing Foucault’s relational ontology into a theoretical encounter with Bhaskar’s depth ontology, I have, I hope, illuminated the potential of combined methodological approaches that are, on the surface, incompatible.

Recommendations for Educational Policy and Practice

Given the persistence of the *hensachi-juku* duology in Japanese education (Goodman & Oka, 2018), it is impractical, even idealistic, to suggest eliminating the system. Indeed, so entrenched is *hensachi* that, as previously detailed, 50,000 *juku* service the incessant race to raise learner scores (Entrich, 2018). Consequently, while abolition would undoubtedly improve student well-being and foster a more holistic learning environment, we should follow the pragmatic example of ‘university

corporations’ and suggest diversified assessment measures that gradually reduce the need for standardised testing altogether. While *esukareitā* and *suisen* transitions play a prominent role in panoptic socio-economic reproduction, continuous assessment models that evaluate student progress throughout the year may reduce the pressures of high-stakes entrance testing and raise equality. Cole and Spence (2012, p. 524), for example, found that learners perceived weekly summative assessment “to be useful in structuring their learning and helping them keep pace with the lecture material, while also supporting exam preparation and boosting confidence”. It is also worth bearing in mind that the *juku* system remains unregulated. As such, while neoliberalism functions through ‘free’ marketisation, it is suggested that Japan brings *juku* ‘out of the shadows’, consolidating it, at least in part, within a structured education system. In doing so, MEXT is better positioned to enact meaningful price controls benefitting low-income households and encourage supplementary schooling to offer a more balanced curriculum that includes not only test preparation but various skills, not least of which English, given the language’s alleged ongoing contributions to “the further development of Japan as a nation” (MEXT, 2003).

Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the importance of *hensachi* to academic prestige grading, Goodman and Oka (2018) note a dearth of systematic research on the topic, whether in Japanese or English. Consequently, given the substantial time, effort, and resources spent on deviation rankings throughout all levels of Japanese education (Jones, 2019), it seems only fitting to begin here. As highlighted in GET 1, whether learners ‘earn’ their *hensachi* in the fires of ‘exam hell’ is largely irrelevant as, no matter which transition method is exploited, all students benefit from—or are *hindered by*—the respective deviation score of their university. Indeed, participant testimony reveals that the race to secure ‘high *hensachi*’ credentials and, in turn, transition to high-paying employment holds significant weight when assessing peer relationships and one’s broader positioning within the social hierarchy. Given that academics seem reluctant to analyse *hensachi*, a wealth of potential research topics reveal themselves, including longitudinal studies, whereby researchers track deviation rankings throughout educational journeys, assessing how academic performance predicts vocational success and identifying key factors influencing changes over time. However, this would bore me and, I suspect, most qualitative researchers to tears. As such, let me suggest ethnographic studies exploring social hierarchies. Through participant observation and focus groups, one may better understand social formations, interactions, and standard deviation scores’ role in establishing group norms. One may also employ narrative techniques, including interviews and written reflections, to explore learner self-esteem and identity formation.

Esukareitā and *suisen* routes, too, remain underrepresented; given the capacity of wealthy households to exploit this system, I feel it crucial that academics address this gap. While Nakamura (2011) investigated the anti-meritocratic “paradox of examination and recommendation in educational selection”, finding that *suisen* transitioners exerted less effort due to assured admittance to their desired college, first-hand accounts of transitions are generally absent. Studies detailing escalator schooling place it within broader critiques of school reform (Green, 2000) or provide historical analyses (Kobari, 2000). These efforts notwithstanding, seemingly little, if any, research on the phenomenon exists in contemporary literature. As such, I recommend building on

the findings presented in GET 1 to explore cultural perceptions and broader societal attitudes of the *esukareitā* and *suisen* pathways. Here, one could analyse cross-sections of Japanese society, including households, practitioners, and employers, seeking to understand the perceived fairness and legitimacy of these systems. More pointedly, such a technique would allow researchers to compare various socio-economic groups and how these pathways impact social mobility and HE access. Examining the institutional and policy settings that facilitate or obstruct *esukareitā* and *suisen* transitions presents another potential avenue for research. For example, investigations comparing transitions from private vs. public schools may provide insight into a range of learner experiences and outcomes. Finally, returning to the theme of this project, one could examine policy papers, educational curricula, and institutional practices to study the underlying structures of non-traditional pathways and their intersections with NPM and governmentality.

Limitations

Sampling and Saturation

The elephant in the room for this project is that my participant sample was drawn from a single department within the same TGUP university. However, recalling MEXT's (2014) prioritisation of the 37 “world-class and innovative” TGUP colleges alongside Maruko's (2014) claim that graduates from these institutions are better positioned to “walk into positions of global leadership”, Western-U's international studies majors present, perhaps, the ideal sample for in-depth idiographic explorations of my research question. Nevertheless, it would have undoubtedly been advantageous to include participants from other TGUP institutions. Notwithstanding the rich and insightful data provided by my sample, I also feel that my inclusion criteria could have been more focused. Indeed, owing to naïve faith in “meritocratic entrance examinations” (Fujita, 2000, p. 43), I had assumed that most, if not all, of my participants had entered via this route. As such, I was surprised to discover that only one, Dream, had done so. While she provided me with invaluable content, Sub-theme 1B, ‘*shiken jigoku*’, would have been strengthened by including more test-taking subjects. Kaori, too, offered compelling testimony; however, as a first-year student at the time of interviewing, I feel that she was, perhaps, too far removed from *shūkatsu* to provide insight into the phenomenon. Finally, recalling saturation in IPA is achieved when meaningful points of comparison and contrast between participant accounts emerge (Smith et al., 2022); my ‘gut feeling’ is that seven or perhaps eight subjects would have sufficed. That said, whilst I may have cursed my decision to proceed with a sample of nine during ten months of data collection, transcription, and analysis, these efforts undoubtedly strengthened my results.

Research Design and Techniques

While IPA allowed me to gain a nuanced understanding of lived entrepreneurial projects, its labour-intensive format required a degree of skill beyond me at the project's beginning. Although I had published numerous publications at that point, the scale and scope of this undertaking far exceeded anything I had previously encountered. Nevertheless, these challenges helped nudge my academic skills and ‘methodological toolkit’ closer to the level required of independent researchers. My supervisor's guidance was crucial throughout, as was Smith et al.'s (2022), who, fortuitously, provided an updated step-by-step breakdown of IPA techniques mere months before I began data

collection. That said, what could have been improved? Recalling that IPA “requires a *verbatim*⁴⁵ record of the data collection event” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 69), something had to be sacrificed linguistically. In one respect, using English to ensure literal transcription may have limited the depth of expression for some participants, as their fluency (while high) varied, potentially affecting the richness of responses. However, following IPA’s idiographic commitment, providing support and allowing for limited responses in Japanese while presenting the original quote alongside its translation helped mitigate these challenges, honouring my subjects’ linguistic proficiencies and acknowledging the importance of their native culture. Finally, I may have taken my intended disruption of the researcher-subject hegemon too far. By encouraging participants to set the times and locations of their sessions, I opened myself up to less-than-optimum research settings. Dream, for instance, requested that she be interviewed following part-time work at an American-style restaurant. While I appreciate the new wave/blue-eyed soul fusion of early-‘80s Hall and Oates, transcribing interview data while contending with *I Can’t Go for That (No Can Do)* was at times challenging—a valuable lesson learnt.

Final Thoughts

As I write the final paragraph of a research project that has dominated my life not only during my five years at Bath but in the near-ten years since I began publishing the research that would lead me here, a wave of surreal melancholy washes over me. Of course, part of this is due to this thesis entering its final form ahead of submission and defence; more poignantly, I am disheartened for Japanese education as it continues to discipline rational units of human capital. Units that are, to me, ‘fully-fledged’ and ‘functional’ adults, irrespective of their credentialed resources, entrepreneurial subjectivities, or respective transitions as *shakaijin*. As such—and I sincerely hope this has been evident throughout—by highlighting my participants and host university as ‘active agents’ of governmentality, I do not seek to denigrate any party; “we must all assume an entrepreneurial disposition to this life form. We fail to do so at our own risk” (Kelly, 2006, p. 29). With this in mind, can neoliberalism ever be remedied? Frankly, I remain sceptical. Besides, people far more accomplished than I—not least Michel Foucault—have failed to provide practical solutions for displacing a phenomenon straddling hegemonic ideology, economic framework, and organisational practice (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). This thesis is no different; there is no suggestion here other than calls for us, no matter the stage of our ‘biographical project’, to critically reflect upon and better understand our position in neoliberalism’s “internal machinery” (Telford & Briggs, 2022, p. 64). In doing so, we are better positioned to eschew narrow self-interest and foster a more inclusive and harmonious society. Heeding the words of Sir Michael Sadler, which ring as true now as they did during the reign of Queen Victoria, is, perhaps, a start:

“Things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and *govern*⁴⁶ and interpret the things inside” (Sadler, 1900/1964, p. 310).

⁴⁵ Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Emphasis added.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: ‘Thick Descriptions’ of the Study’s Participants

Appendix 1A: Kenji

During his interviews, Kenji was a 20-year-old third-grade student majoring in International Politics. He had studied English for six to seven years, attaining a TOEIC score of 950. His English skills developed significantly due to his experience of attending an international junior high school in Germany after moving due to his father’s job. Kenji’s language abilities extend beyond English; he also studies German and mainly focuses on learning Russian. His interest in Russian stems from his ten-month study abroad experience in Lithuania, where he had to communicate in Lithuanian and Russian. Kenji’s father works as a salesman, and his mother is a homemaker. His father speaks English due to his job requirements, while his mother knows only Japanese. Kenji’s family has moved several times due to his father’s job, which has significantly impacted his education. Despite this, Kenji’s parents did not pressure him to follow a specific educational path; instead, he could make his own choices. After returning from Germany, Kenji attended a private international ‘escalator’ high school within the Western-U Group, which provided ample English classes and was frequented by returnees, making it a suitable choice for his international background. Although Kenji did not experience the typical pressure of Japanese entrance exams due to his unique educational path, he acknowledges their challenges and competitiveness. In his early education, Kenji attended *juku* to reinforce his academic skills. He gradually accepted the *juku* routine, especially during junior high school. Despite the additional pressure, he did not feel it detracted from his childhood. Instead, it helped him improve academically, especially in difficult subjects. While not experiencing exam hell himself, Kenji acknowledges the pressure many students face during entrance exams and its impact on their relationships and overall well-being. After graduation, Kenji will choose to continue his education as a postgraduate before entering either academia or the Japanese Government, specifically the Ministry of Defence, and was preparing to take the civil servants exam at the time of his interview. However, he remains open to international sales work, particularly in Germany and Poland, due to his language skills and the latter’s growing economy.

Appendix 1B: Elisa

During her interviews, Elisa was a 21-year-old junior majoring in International Studies. She attended a public school where English was a compulsory subject and had studied the language for about eight to nine years, achieving a TOEIC score of 835. In addition to English, she has studied Korean and Chinese, driven by school requirements rather than personal interests. Elisa entered Western-U via recommendation. Her family comprises her father, a salaryman, and her mother, a public servant working at a junior high school. Both of her parents attended university and have a basic proficiency in English, which influenced Elisa’s interest in the language. A trip to Australia at age ten, where she witnessed her parents communicating in English, left a lasting impression on her, inspiring her to learn the language. For her secondary education, Elisa chose to attend a school that offered opportunities to study abroad via its international major, which her parents supported. Her study abroad experiences include learning English in the Philippines and

the United States. Elisa observed significant differences between the educational systems in Japan and these countries. In America, she appreciated the ability to choose subjects but noted a lack of support for exchange students compared to Japan. Elisa views Japan as a *gakureki shakai* and has mixed feelings about this system. She dislikes the escalator system, which allows students to progress through school levels with minimal effort if they are part of certain prestigious educational institutions from a young age. She believes this system can be unfair and heavily influenced by financial means, as evidenced by her boyfriend's experience, where he progressed with minimal effort due to being part of Western-U's escalator system. Despite her criticisms, Elisa acknowledges that being part of a prestigious university has advantages. She believes graduating from such an institution enhances her social and professional opportunities, regardless of the specific skills or knowledge acquired during her studies. Elisa attended *juku* briefly at around 15, mainly to prepare for school tests. Although it was her choice to attend, her friends influenced her, and she found the experience underwhelming and pressure-filled. She expected *juku* to improve her academic skills significantly but found it challenging due to the competitive atmosphere and difficulty asking questions in a large class setting. At the time of the interview, Elisa's vocational aspirations were unclear, but due to her educational choices and experiences, she preferred a career with international exposure and has since begun working at a travel agency.

Appendix 1C: Dream

During her interviews, Dream was a 21-year-old third-year student majoring in International Studies. She studied English for about nine years, starting from junior high school, with her motivation stemming from her interest in pop culture, which she found captivating. Dream's proficiency in English is evident, with a TOEIC score of 880. Besides English, Dream has also studied Korean, driven by her love for K-pop. Dream's family background played a significant role in shaping her educational journey. Her mother, who owns a bar in Osaka, dropped out of a short-term university (*tandai*), and her sister is an art school student in Tokyo. Unlike many students, Dream did not experience significant parental pressure regarding her studies. Instead, her mother encouraged her to be independent and self-motivated. Despite her independence, Dream's educational path was not without its challenges. She attended a private high school due to failing the entrance exam for a public school. This experience was initially disappointing as the private school was not her preferred choice and lacked an international environment. However, this setback motivated her to focus intensively on her English studies during high school, which ultimately benefited her academic trajectory. She attended *juku* during junior high and high school, benefiting from the guidance of university student tutors and qualified teachers. While she did not feel pressured to attend cram school due to her peers, she valued the additional support it provided in achieving her academic goals. Upon passing the entrance exam, she attended Western-U because she believed it would secure her a better future. She appreciates the ability to balance part-time jobs, internships, and studies during this time, contrasting it with the experiences of friends who began working immediately after high school. At the time, Dream had not studied abroad; however, in the intervening time, she secured a scholarship and lived in Australia for one year, teaching Japanese to children. Dream's perspective on the Japanese education system is critical; she believes it is unfair due to economic disparities affecting access to private education and resources. Reflecting on her future, Dream aims to leverage her language skills and international

studies background to pursue a career involving international work. She remains open to opportunities outside Japan, influenced by her affinity for different cultures and languages.

Appendix 1D: Hana

During her interviews, Hana was a 20-year-old third-grade student majoring in International Studies. She has studied English since she was eight years old, inspired by her sister's attendance at English classes. Her English proficiency is high, with a TOEIC score of 800. Hana also speaks some French, a language she had to learn because it was the country of origin of her private junior high and high school. Hana's father is an engineer who speaks Thai due to his work, while her mother is a homemaker. While her father attended university, her mother attended a two-year college for art (*tandai*) but did not graduate. Hana's parents have significantly influenced her education, particularly her mother, who always encouraged her to study hard. She enrolled her in an educational program called *Kodomo Challenge* ('children challenge'), which provided monthly educational materials to support her learning from elementary school. She found her experience at the private school to be positive and beneficial, particularly the opportunity to study abroad. She spent three months attending a high school in New Zealand, observing significant differences between the New Zealand and Japanese educational systems. In New Zealand, students were free to create their schedules, a level of responsibility typically seen in Japanese universities. Her decision to attend Western-U was influenced by her desire to work for a large company, which often use educational background as a filter in the hiring process. Despite her achievements and recommendation transition, Hana acknowledges the intense pressure and competitiveness of the Japanese education system. Hana's parents, particularly her mother, played a crucial role in guiding her educational path, constantly encouraging her to study. Although she felt significant pressure from her mother, it was balanced by the support and resources provided. She believes that while children should be free to make their own educational choices, this freedom is often constrained by the family's economic situation. She also feels the Japanese education system is unfair, as it heavily depends on the family's financial capability. After graduation, Hana plans to pursue a career in a large company, leveraging her language skills and international experience.

Appendix 1E: Sachiko

During her interviews, Sachiko was a 20-year-old third-year student majoring in International Relations. She began learning English in seventh grade and continued her studies into university, achieving a B2 level of proficiency, considered upper-intermediate. Although she briefly studied Spanish in high school, she discontinued it. Her family's diverse background heavily influences Sachiko's educational journey. Her mother, a professional opera singer trained at a music university, met her father while studying abroad in Italy. Her father, who is half-Romanian and originally from Italy, now runs an Italian language school. While Sachiko's mother is fluent in Japanese and Italian, her father speaks his native languages and has limited Japanese proficiency. Sachiko's educational path reflects a balance of independence and guidance from her parents. Her father encouraged her to avoid the traditional Japanese educational system, favouring an international approach; this led Sachiko to attend private international middle and high schools, which directly connect to Western-U. Although her parents supported her choices, the seamless transition from high school to university significantly influenced her decision to attend Western-

U. Sachiko perceives Japan as a credentialist society, and despite feeling pressured to follow a conventional educational path, she acknowledges that this pressure is common among her peers. The societal expectation to pursue higher education was so ingrained that she did not consider alternative paths after high school. Her parents' cosmopolitan background and non-traditional career paths have imbued Sachiko with a unique perspective. She is aware of the systemic pressures in Japanese society but has navigated them with the relative freedom afforded by her international upbringing and her parents' supportive approach. Sachiko recognises the disparity in educational opportunities, attributing much of it to socio-economic status. She feels fortunate to have had access to quality education and the freedom to choose her path, unlike many students who face limited options. Her career aspirations remain open, but she is focused on leveraging her international education and language skills to work abroad.

Appendix 1F: Kaori

During her interviews, Kaori was a 19-year-old freshman majoring in International Studies. She has studied English for nearly ten years. Her interest in English began with her desire to communicate with a diverse range of people and her fascination with different cultures and languages. Kaori's proficiency in English is moderate, with a TOEIC score of around 500, placing her at the B1 level. Her passion for languages extends beyond English; she is also self-studying Korean and Arabic. Her interest in Korean stems from frequent trips to Korea with her mother, and her attraction to Arabic is driven by its artistic script, reflecting her love for art. Kaori's family plays a supportive role in her education. Her father owns and runs a car shop, while her mother recently opened her salon. Neither of her parents attended university, and they do not speak any foreign languages, yet they encourage Kaori in her academic pursuits, offering financial support and freedom to make her educational choices. Kaori had a brief stint at a *juku*, which she attended for only three months. Unlike many of her peers who spent years at *juku*, she felt it did not significantly impact her childhood, allowing her ample time to play and engage in other activities. Her *juku* experience was one-on-one with a university student tutor. Kaori has attended private schools since junior high, choosing schools with strong English programs and opportunities for studying abroad. Kaori's brief study abroad experience in Malaysia broadened her horizons, exposing her to different cultures and social issues such as internationalisation and equality. This trip, although short, left a lasting impression and motivated her to think about global issues and her role in addressing them. Kaori is aware of the competitive nature of Japanese society, where educational background significantly impacts job prospects and salary levels. She first recognised this societal pressure in junior high school and feels influenced by it as she aims for higher education to secure better future opportunities. Despite this, Kaori believes in the importance of individual expression and communication skills rather than solely focusing on academic credentials. Kaori has experienced disappointment in her academic journey, particularly with standardised tests like TOEIC. She feels these tests, which emphasise grammar and vocabulary over practical communication skills, do not accurately reflect her English abilities, which led her to buy TOEIC preparation books. However, she found the study process unenjoyable and not beneficial for her language skills. She appreciates the necessity of these exams but prefers more engaging learning methods. Despite the challenges, Kaori maintains a positive outlook and enthusiastically pursues her language studies. She hopes to study abroad soon, believing

immersion in an English-speaking environment will significantly enhance her language proficiency. Kaori's experiences reflect a balance between navigating societal expectations and following her interests, supported by a family that values her autonomy and educational aspirations.

Appendix 1G: Yuuki

During his interviews, Yuuki was a 21-year-old senior majoring in Political Science at the School of International Studies. His journey through education has been quite diverse, having lived in different countries and experienced various educational systems. Yuuki spent his first grade in America before returning to Japan for a year. He then lived in Mexico for two and a half years, attending a school where he experienced a mix of students from different backgrounds, including wealthy classmates. Yuuki chose a Western-U-affiliated international immersion school due to its connection to his desired college, Western-U, where he could avoid the pressures of the Japanese entrance exams. Yuuki speaks English, Spanish, and Japanese fluently. His language abilities developed through international experiences, particularly in America and Mexico. Despite the challenges of moving frequently due to his father's job in logistics, Yuuki's parents gave him the freedom to make his educational choices. They supported his decision to attend international school, even though they initially opposed it due to the cost and the potential impact on his GPA. Yuuki sees universities as places to focus on specific areas of study and develop skills relevant to one's future career. He believes Japanese universities can better prepare students for the workforce by offering a more practical and application-based education. Regarding career aspirations, Yuuki is interested in pursuing a postgraduate degree in Political Science in America, preferably on the East Coast, with NYU as one of his top choices, focusing on academia or working in a think tank in the United States. He sees these paths as opportunities to impact policy and society meaningfully, leveraging his education and skills to contribute to positive change. He plans to focus on international relations, leveraging his language skills and diverse cultural experiences. Yuuki acknowledges Japan's credential-focused society and its impact on job opportunities. However, he remains determined to pursue his academic and career goals, aiming for a future that involves international work and further academic achievements. Yuuki sees his uniqueness and non-conformity as strengths, particularly for an international career. He values skills like oral communication and the ability to present ideas effectively, which he attributes to his education and sports background.

Appendix 1H: Yoshiko

During her interviews, Yoshiko, a 22-year-old fourth-year student majoring in International Communications at Western-U, spoke openly about her educational journey and experiences. Yoshiko's interest in English started when she was around eight or nine years old, spurred by her fascination with American high school life after watching *High School Musical*. This interest eventually led her to become an exchange student in the US, where she encountered cultural and educational differences, shaping her views on learning. Yoshiko also briefly studied French for three years, mainly due to curriculum requirements, but her passion for languages was primarily focused on English. She shared her TOEIC score of 825. Raised by a single mother, a teacher, who prioritised education despite financial challenges, Yoshiko recognised her mother's sacrifices for her education, fostering a sense of responsibility and gratitude. Her educational path included

attending a public elementary school, followed by a private junior high and high school with an international program. The opportunity to participate in a study abroad program influenced her decision to attend this school, reflecting Yoshiko's early interest in global experiences. One significant setback Yoshiko faced was cancelling a six-month volunteer program in Indonesia, which she had eagerly anticipated. This experience taught her resilience and the importance of adapting to unforeseen circumstances, aligning with her responsibility to make the most of educational opportunities. Yoshiko's interview reveals a young woman who navigated Japan's education system with luck and determination. Unlike many of her peers who faced the pressure cooker of entrance exams, she managed to bypass this intense period due to her English proficiency and the recommendation from her school. Her choice to attend her junior high and high school was not driven by its reputation but rather by her desire to study abroad and learn English. Despite not following the traditional route of exam preparation, Yoshiko acknowledges the pressures and challenges faced by her peers. Her experiences with *juku* and witnessing the stress on her cousin showcase the heavy burden many Japanese students carry. Her time at high school, though not academically prestigious by some standards, was enriching. She interacted with students from various countries, honed her English skills, and even had the opportunity to study abroad in the United States. Nevertheless, she encounters judgment from others prioritising academic rankings, highlighting the disparity in perceptions within Japan's education culture. Upon graduation, Yoshiko intends to remain at Western-U after being accepted for postgraduate study.

Appendix II: Taiki

During his interviews, Taiki was a 22-year-old fourth-grade student specialising in International Studies, focusing on international politics. He began studying English about ten years ago, primarily motivated by the necessity for university entrance exams. Taiki's initial years of English study were primarily focused on exam preparation, although his proficiency increased after high school, primarily through university courses taught by native speakers and interactions with exchange students. While he briefly studied French, his primary language focus remained on English. His TOEIC score is 825, which he seeks to improve. Taiki's family background includes a father who was a professional golfer in Texas, later transitioning into business, and a mother who is a homemaker. His father's experiences abroad heavily influenced Taiki's interest in studying internationally. Taiki attended an escalator school within the Western-U group, attracted by its campus aesthetics compared to his previous public school experiences. Taiki's competitive nature was especially pronounced in high school, where he focused intensely on achieving the high scores necessary to gain admission into Western-U's Department of International Studies. His parents influenced this goal and strongly encouraged him to pursue this specific department, although Taiki was not entirely clear on their reasons. He internalised their aspirations despite the pressure and worked diligently to meet their expectations. Taiki's relationship with his teachers was strained in junior high and high school. He described a sense of animosity towards many of his teachers, feeling that they were not supportive or aligned with his academic ambitions. His high school experience was marked by a lack of meaningful engagement with teachers, contrasting sharply with his parents' expectations and the pressure they placed on him to succeed. Despite the pressures and challenges, Taiki valued the escalator system at Western-U, which facilitated his seamless transition from high school to college. He viewed this system as beneficial, allowing him

to focus on his studies and pursue his interests without the added stress of external entrance exams. This continuity also fostered a sense of belonging and pride in the university's reputation, which Taiki grew to care about more deeply during his university years. Although he initially considered pursuing a university outside the Western-U system due to societal pressure regarding prestigious universities, he ultimately stayed due to the experiences and opportunities provided by the university. One significant setback in Taiki's university education was his failure to join an exchange program at Texas A&M University. This event temporarily shifted his focus from English to pursuing his dream of becoming a professional golfer, balancing this with English proficiency and academic achievements. Taiki's views on Japan's educational system echo common criticisms regarding its rigid structure and emphasis on prestigious universities. He believes this system limits individual choices and may not adequately prepare students for real-world challenges. Despite setbacks, Taiki remains optimistic about his future, considering options in golf and professional careers and leveraging his language skills and education.

Appendix 2: This Study's Information Form

Information Form/情報用紙

Entrepreneurs of the Self: Understanding Neoliberal Governance in Japanese Higher Education (working title)

Researcher/研究者: Michael Dean Smith ([REDACTED]@Bath.ac.uk)

Supervisor/研究監督者: Dr. Ioannis Costas Batlle ([REDACTED]@bath.ac.uk)

Hello, and thank you for agreeing to meet me; it's very much appreciated! I would like to interview you as part of my doctoral research project. Before you decide on your participation, I would like to explain what this means for you.

こんにちは、そしてお会いすることに同意していただきありがとうございます。私の博士課程研究プロジェクトの一環として、あなたにインタビューをしたいと思います。その前に、あなたが何をするのか説明します。

What is this research project about? この研究プロジェクトは何なのか？

I want to understand your meaningful educational experiences, including elementary school, middle school, high school, and university, as well as your career aspirations after graduation.

小学校、中学校、高校、大学などの有意義な教育経験や、卒業後の進路希望などを把握したい。

Why have I been chosen to take part? なぜ私が参加することになったのですか？

You have been asked to participate due to your educational background, including university study, potential study abroad experiences, and experiences with the Japanese education system.

大学での学習、留学の可能性、日本の教育制度に関する経験など、学歴を考慮した上で参加していただいています。

Do I have to take part? 参加しなければならないのでしょうか？

Your participation in this study is **entirely voluntary**. If you do decide to take part, then thank you again! If you don't want to participate or, after our interview, decide that you no longer wish to, you may withdraw without giving a reason. Please don't worry about it!

この研究への参加は、完全に任意です。もし、あなたが参加することを決めたら、改めてお礼を申し上げます。もし、あなたが参加したくない、または、インタビューの後、もう参加したくないと思った場合は、理由を言わずに辞退することができます。ご心配なく。

What will happen with the information I provide? 提供した情報はどうなるのですか？

I will mainly use it to write my thesis. I might also use it to publish some research articles.

主に卒論を書くのに使う予定です。また、研究論文を発表するのも使うかもしれません。

What would taking part involve? 参加するにはどうしたらいいのでしょうか？

If you agree, you will be asked to conduct one recorded interview in person, which will last approximately one hour, maybe a little longer. The interview will focus on your experiences as a student in the Japanese education system and will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you.

あなたが同意した場合、録音されたインタビューを 1 回、直接行うよう依頼されます。インタビューは、日本の教育制度におけるあなたの学生としての経験に焦点を当て、あなたの都合の良い時間と場所で行われます。

Are there benefits or disadvantages to taking part? 参加するメリット、デメリットはありますか？

None! Your participation or non-participation will have no impact on your education. However, it will let me understand your educational experiences and future ambitions.

なし、残念!参加・不参加は、あなたの教育に何の影響も与えません。しかし、あなたの教育経験や将来の夢を理解することはできます。

Will participation involve discomfort? 参加に際して、不快な思いをすることはないのでしょくか？

Again, I hope none! However, if you feel uncomfortable, I will stop the interview immediately. If you do not wish to answer a question, then don't. Your comfort is my number one priority!

繰り返しになりますが、ないことを祈りますしかし、もしあなたが不快に感じたら、私はすぐにインタビューを中止します。質問に答えたくないのであれば、答えなければいいのです。あなたの快適さを第一に考えています。

Will my identity be kept secret? 私の身元は守られるのでしょうか？

Of course! Other people may read what you said, but they won't know you said it because I'll use a fake name of your choosing (I can help if you like).

もちろんです。あなたが言ったことを他の人が読むかもしれませんが、あなたが言ったことはわかりません。あなたが選んだ偽名を使いますから（よかったらお手伝いします）。

Can I stop participating whenever I want to? 参加はいつでもやめられますか？

Of course! If, at any point, you feel you no longer want to be a part of my project, all you have to do is tell me. Nothing bad will happen – your life and education will continue the same way as before. I will delete all the information you gave me, with no hard feelings!

もちろんです。私のプロジェクトに参加したくないと感じたら、いつでも私に伝えてください。何も悪いことは起こりません。あなたの生活と教育はこれまでと同じように続けられます。あなたが私にくれた情報はすべて削除します。

Appendix 3: This Study's Informed Consent Form

Ethical Consent Form/同意書

Entrepreneurs of the Self: Understanding Neoliberal Governance in Japanese Higher Education (working title)

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, circle the appropriate responses and sign the declaration. If you do not understand anything or require more information, please ask.

本書をよくお読みになり、ご記入ください。この研究に参加する意思がある場合は、該当する回答に丸をつけ、宣言書に署名してください。もし、わからないことがあり、さらに詳しい情報をお知りになりたい場合は、お尋ねください。

- Yes/No** • The aims of the research have been explained to me and I have been provided opportunities to ask questions. 研究の目的を説明され、質問の機会も与えられました。
- Yes/No** • I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without prejudice or having to give an explanation. 私は、説明の必要なく、いつでもこの研究から脱退することができることを理解しています。
- Yes/No** • I understand that all information will be confidential and that I will not be named in any work arising from this study. 私は、すべての情報は機密であり、いかなる研究においても私の名前が公表されないことを理解しています。
- Yes/No** • I understand that my interview(s) will be recorded as part of the research. 私は、研究の一環として、私のインタビューが録音されることを理解しています。
- Yes/No** • I understand that all interview material, including audio files and transcripts, will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed upon completion of this project. 私は、オーディオファイルやトランスクリプトを含むすべてのインタビュー資料は、研究のためにのみ使用され、このプロジェクトの完了後に破棄されることを理解しています。
- Yes/No** • I understand that involvement is strictly on a voluntary basis, and agree to participate in this study as outlined to me verbally and in this document. 私は、この研究が任意であることを理解し、参加することに同意します。

I freely give my consent to participate in this research and have been given a copy of this form for my own information. 私はこの研究に参加することに同意し、この用紙のコピーをもらいました。

Participant Name (名前):

Participant Signature(署名):

Appendix 4: This Study's Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Initial/Demographic Questions:

So, to begin with, would you mind answering the following background questions?

- Can you tell me your age, major, and grade, please?
- For how long have you been studying English?
 - Why did you start studying English?
 - Do you regularly study any other languages? Why these?
- Finally, would you mind telling me your TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, GTEC score? (Introduce CEFR scale)

Family Background (“Embedded Chooser”) Questions:

Would you mind quickly telling me about your parents?

- Did they attend university and what do/did they do professionally?
- How much influence do/did they have over your education generally?
 - Do they help you much with your educational choices?
- Do either of your parents speak a foreign language? If so, which?
 - Do you know why they chose that language specifically?

Educational Background Questions:

- Have you ever studied at a private school in Japan?
 - Did you have any choice in attending this school?
 - Was it part of any special programmes?
- Have you ever studied outside of Japan? If so, where and for how long?
 - Did you notice any major differences between this and Japanese schools?

Japanese Society Questions:

- Japan has been described as a *gakureki-shakai* (“credentialist society”), do you agree?
 - How, if at all, has this part of Japanese culture influenced your educational decisions?
 - What age did you realise this?
- In your opinion, what is a “good” Japanese citizen?
- Do you think that people are “free” to make their own choices, or are they pressured?
 - Do you think Japanese education is fair for all?
- What does the term *kejime* mean to you?
 - Tell me about a time that you didn’t do as well in your education as you’d hoped?
 - Did you change anything about the way you studied after this event?
 - Do you think *kejime* influenced your decision to change?
- Many people outside of Japan view Japanese people as hard-working and dutiful. Do you agree?
 - Can you tell me about a time when you worked hard in your education?
 - What motivated you?
 - Do you feel a “duty” to work hard on your studies?
 - If so, to who or what?
 - Is being responsible important to you?

- How does being responsible as a youngster affect your adult life?
- Forgetting the dictionary definition, what does *shakaijin* mean to you?

Shadow Education Questions:

- Have you ever studied in a *juku*? If so, what type, at which ages, and for how many hours a day?
 - Did you choose to enrol in a *juku*, did your parents make that decision, or was it mutual?
 - Why did you/your parents make that choice?
 - At the time, how did you feel about studying at a *juku*?
 - How about now, have your opinions changed?
 - What were your thoughts on the people that you attended *juku* with?
 - Was there much competition between you?
- Do schools properly prepare students for entrance examinations?
- Do you feel that there is a societal pressure to enrol in *juku*?
 - How do you think that *juku* affects families who can't afford the fees, if at all?
 - Do you think that harmony means that everyone has their place or role in life?

“Exam Hell” Questions:

- What are your opinions on entrance examinations?
- Can you please describe your experiences with *shiken jigoku* (“exam hell”)?
 - What is your first memory of *shiken jigoku*?
 - What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of this system?
 - During *shiken jigoku*, how did you view your classmates?
- Have you ever known anyone who took the decision to study as a *ronin*?
 - If so, why do you think they made that choice?
- Would you have considered *ronin* study if your grades hadn't been high enough to enter WU?
- If you don't do well in tests, do you see it as your responsibility to improve?

Pre-University Education Questions:

- Can you describe an important educational event or memory from your *shōnen/shōjo* period?
 - Can you tell me more about your time in middle school?
 - Do you feel this school was “international”, either in its lessons, students, or teachers?
 - Did you have any choice in attending this school?
 - If yes, would you have argued or disagreed with your parents if they wanted to send you somewhere else?
 - Did you consider the school's ranking or reputation before applying?
 - If no, how does that make you feel?
 - If no, so where would you have preferred to go?
- Can you describe an important educational event or memory from your *seinen* period?
 - Can you tell me more about your time in high school?
 - Do you feel this school was “international”, either in its lessons, students, or teachers?
 - Did you have any choice in attending this school?
 - If yes, would you have argued or disagreed with your parents if they wanted to send you somewhere else?
 - Did you consider the school's ranking or reputation before applying?
 - If no, how does that make you feel?

- If no, so where would you have preferred to go?

Current University Questions:

- Do you remember when you first realised that you wanted to go to university?
 - What, in your opinion, is the most important purpose of university education?
- How about the first time you realised that you wanted to come to WU?
 - Was WU your first-choice university?
 - Why or why not?
 - So, why did you choose to come here?
 - Did you consider WU's ranking before applying?
 - How about its reputation?
 - Do you mind sharing the other universities that you applied to? Why these?
 - What would you have done if you hadn't got into your preferred university?
 - Regarding your education and future job goals, do you think that you made the right decision by enrolling here?
 - Do you think attending WU changed you or your life in any way?
- Why did you choose your major specifically?
- What's the most useful thing that you have learned in WU so far?

Study Abroad Questions:

- Have you ever studied abroad before? If so, where?
- Do you remember when you first wanted to SA?
- As part of your major, you must study abroad. Which university did/will you go to and why?
- Do you think that SA will help you in your future career? If so, how?

Globalisation & Human Capital Questions:

- Forgetting the dictionary definition, what does the term *gurōbaruka* mean to you?
- What, in your opinion, are the most important skills for *gurōbaru jinzai*?
- Do you think/hope that you will use foreign languages in your future job?
- Outside of studying at WU SIS, what are you doing to be a "global person"?
 - Is being a "global person" important to you? Why or why not?
- Some Japanese politicians, academics, and businesspeople think that Japanese workers often find it hard to be "global" people. Do you agree or disagree with them?
 - Why do you think this is?

Job Hunting Questions:

- So, do you know what it is you want to do when you graduate?
 - If yes, for how long have you had this ambition?
 - Did this goal influence your decision to enrol at WU?
 - How about your decision to learn English?
- Have you started *shūshoku katsudō* yet?
 - If so, what kind of companies are you targeting and why?
 - In what way will your education help you get this job?
 - What activities have you taken part in as part of your job hunting?
- How do you feel about *shūshoku katsudō*?

- What skills do you think are useful for successful *shūshoku katsudō*?
- Do you feel more “grown up” after having attended university?
- How do you think you will feel if you don’t get the job that you want?
 - Have you ever felt *shūkatsu utsu*?
 - How did it make you feel?
 - What did you do about it?
- Have you heard of the *gakureki filter*?
 - If yes, do you believe it to be true?
 - How does this make you feel?
 - Do you think your WU grades matter during *shūshoku katsudō*?
 - Do you think WU’s reputation is strong enough for you to get the “top” jobs?
- Let’s say that you get multiple offers from companies during *shūshoku katsudō*, which company would you choose and why?
- Do you agree with WU letting you miss classes for *shūshoku katsudō* activities?
 - What has been your most useful *shūshoku katsudō* activity so far?
 - What could WU have done to better prepare or help you with *shūshoku katsudō*?

Competitive Society questions:

- In terms of your education and future career, what would be a “failure” to you?
 - Would you feel ashamed if this happened?
 - What would you do if this happened?
- Can you tell me about a time you felt anxious about your education or future?
 - Did you change your behaviour or study habits because of this?
- So, regarding your education, do you see yourself as a responsible person?
 - If so, can you give me an example?
- So, do you see yourself as an independent person?
 - If so, can you give me an example?
- So, do you see yourself as a competitive person?
 - If so, can you give me an example of a time you felt you had to compete?
 - How did this make you feel at the time?
 - How about now? Do you feel any differently?
- Do you see yourself studying after you become a *shakaijin*? Why or why not?

Wrap-up questions (optional):

- What do you think is the most important thing that you’ve done to become a *shakaijin*?
- So, in your opinion, what are the most important skills that you have learned during your education up until this point?
- So, after reflecting on your education up until this point, do you think you would advise your future children to do anything differently?

Appendix 5: This Study's Follow-up Interview Guide

Follow-up Interview Guide

Japanese Education Questions:

- Is your grade ranking compared to other students important to you?
 - How about during JHS and HS?
- Did you share the name of your future HS or uni with your classmates before graduation?
 - If not, when is an appropriate time to tell your classmates?
 - Is this a spoken or unspoken agreement?
 - Is this a harmony thing?
- Did you feel pressured to go to a good school or uni by your teachers?
 - Did they ever use the term “mottainai” when talking about people who don’t?
- What do you think of the escalator system?
- Have you taken any classes that explain what is expected of you in society?
 - If so, what did they teach you?
- Do you think that Japanese education is militaristic?
 - If so, how?
 - Do you think that Japanese schools pressure students to be the same?
 - If so, how and why?
- During JHS or HS, did your studies influence your friend decisions?
- Do you think that lots of individual study negatively affects a person’s teamwork abilities?
- How do you feel about maths?
 - Why do you think maths is so important?
 - Did you ever take part in PISA?
 - If so, how did it make you feel?
 - Was it a useful experience for your future?
 - Were you worried about your maths skills during shiken jigoku?

The Recommendation System Questions:

- At what age did you discover the recommendation system? Did you aim to use it immediately?
- Is there a limit on the number of recommendations your school could send?
 - If so, why were you chosen?
- Do you know if WU sends your SIS grades to your HS?
 - If so, how does this make you feel?
 - Does it motivate you to do better?
 - What would happen to students in your HS if you didn’t get good grades at WU?
- Did your HS attendance or behaviour records affect your selection for recommendation?
- Were you allowed to apply to other unis when going through the recommendation system?

Escalator Questions:

- How do you feel about not being allowed to apply to other unis?
- Did it frustrate you to have your choice removed?

Private Education Questions:

- Did you go to private school to avoid “traditional” Japanese teaching and learning style?
- Did you experience any “college-like” lessons in JHS or HS?
- Did you have any lessons or activities that taught you about responsibility?
- Do you think that private HS care more about your education, or that you went to a good uni?

WU Questions:

- What do you think of the hensachi system? How about WU’s hensachi?
- In your opinion, what is WU’s “brand strength”? (Daigaku burando sōgō-ryoku)
- Do you care more about WU’s reputation after studying here?
 - If so, did other students/friends influence you?
- Have you taken the “Life Design” class at WU?
 - If so, what did you learn?
- WU’s entrance exams are early. Why do you think this is?
- Do you think that going to uni is like paying for your freedom for four years?

Juku Questions:

- Do you feel that you “lost” your childhood to juku?
 - If so, how does that make you feel now? How about then?
- Did you feel pressured by your juku teachers to take entrance exams for good schools and unis?
 - Did you juku teachers study at good unis?
- Did you feel pressured by your juku teachers to be more competitive?
 - If so, how?
 - Did they use a grade ranking system or seat you by grade order?
 - If so, how did this make you feel?
 - How did you view your juku classmates?
- Did you feel pressured to attend juku because your friends and classmates went there?

Shūkatsu & Japanese Society Questions:

- In your opinion, what is the most competitive part of Japanese society?
- Do you think that it’s *actually* important to give your opinions freely?
- Is there any way of avoiding shūkatsu? How so?
- Do you feel more competitive about shūkatsu now you’ve studied at WU?
 - Do you sometimes feel a little jealous if another WU student gets a good job?
- Do you think it’s possible to be a shakaijin and have an independent personality?
- Japanese companies like SA experience because you learn skills not taught locally. Like what?
- Do you think that creativity is important to shūkatsu?
 - Do you think that the Japanese education style prepares people to be creative?

EFL Questions:

- Did studying for English tests (entrance exams and TOEIC) improve your communication ability?
- Have you ever been shamed by others when speaking English?
 - If so, how did this make you feel?
 - Did it motivate you to improve?