

A Study on the Employability of Law School Graduates in Japan

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In Japan, law schools are legally required to be postgraduate institutions for the training of legal professionals. Despite this, only half the graduates from these schools between 2009 and 2013 were able to pass the National Bar Examination and were appointed as legal apprentices by the Supreme Court of Japan. These apprentices can receive training at the Legal Training and Research Institute and, after completing the training programme, can obtain a national licence to practice law. As a result, those graduates who failed the Bar Examination had no choice but to reluctantly engage in other professions or remain unemployed. This paper examines the following question: what kinds of careers outside of the legal sphere do these graduates generally choose?

Given that graduates cannot find employment appropriate to their Juris Doctor degree, this can mean a great loss of highly educated personnel to Japanese society. Research describing the career routes of law graduates in detail cannot be found, although there are a number of previous studies concerning law schools: for instance, comprehensive research on the development of Japanese professional schools including law schools (Amano 2004, Hashimoto 2009, and Yoshida & Hashimoto 2010), case studies about the educational content of law schools (Miyazawa 2003, Kawabata 2007, and Takizawa 2007), and statistical research on the pass rate of the National Bar Examination (Shiina, et. al. 2010). In other words, law school graduates who failed the Bar Examination are treated as having virtually disappeared in vocational terms from Japanese society.

This paper tries to shed light on the existence of graduates who have ‘disappeared’. The Special Committee for Law Schools at the Central Council for Education also places great emphasis on this problem. On 19 July 2012, it published a proposal entitled, “A Plan to Improve Education at Law Schools”, suggesting that ‘Law schools need to grasp career routes of their graduates and improve their career support services in order to assist graduates in taking active part in not only legal circles but also other various areas’. Moreover, Kaneko (2011: 12) condemns Japanese universities for neglecting their duty to provide career support services for their graduates. (These universities are likely to neglect their duty because of the long tradition that most fourth-year university students can secure future jobs or entrance into a postgraduate school before graduation.)

The purpose of this paper is to describe the employability of law school graduates in Japan. More precisely, the paper attempts to delineate the following:

- ✓ Law school graduates’ career routes outside the legal sphere
- ✓ Career support systems at law schools
- ✓ Successful career models for graduates who fail the National Bar Examination

The paper then argues that law schools are discouraged from improving their career support systems for non-legal professionals because they are evaluated largely by the percentage of successful graduates who pass the Bar Examination. If a law school’s percentage of graduates who pass the Examination remains below half the average, the school will suffer a significant reduction of governmental subsidies and problems with its accreditation process.

A policy for subsidy reduction was decided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan in 2013. The decision strongly impacted law schools. Indeed, 18 in 73 schools became subject to the cut in the 2014 academic year, and 16 of those 18 schools have already determined not to accept new students for the 2015 academic year. This difficult survival game has naturally been forcing remaining law schools to concentrate their efforts predominately on preparing their students for the Bar Examination.

The presentation of this paper consists of five parts: (1) an introduction; (2) a brief history of law schools in Japan; (3) an examination of the following question: Are there too many law schools or law school graduates?; (4) a model for career support systems for non-legal professionals; and (5) a conclusion.

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