Education as a social right and profession-devaluation: some experiences of Latin American graduates who work in Japan.

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**Abstract**

This paper introduces some findings of a larger research carried on in Japan in the 2002\(^1\) about the increasing immigration of Latin American workers. During the in-depth interviews and non-participant observation it was identified that even though a large proportion of the informants were graduates they were ‘non-qualified’ workers in Japan. Therefore, this paper intends to explore the issue of what I call *profession-devaluation* as one deserving further extend survey. The paper divides into two parts. The first introduces briefly the theoretical framework of Citizenship in which social rights, the rights to work and education, have been described as means to get access to a *civilized* life. The second part introduces some words of Latin American graduates who work in Japan. The current social value of education is given by the implicit promise that it is through education that people may get access to better jobs. Therefore, there is an understanding that it is through education that people may get access to better employment opportunities. However, the increasing mobility of workers from developing to developed countries are evidencing that the education level by itself it is not enough to access better jobs neither at their country of origin nor in the receiving country. The results of the field research in Japan suggest that emigration of workers, focusing on the graduates, from a developing country to a developed one, seems to imply *profession-devaluation* for them in the receiving labour market. They access the Japanese labour market as non-qualified workers. In fact, it is precisely that characteristic that make such immigration relevant to the Japanese case. These findings invite us to consider homologating, for graduates regardless their nationality, job opportunities in a current world order called ‘globalised’. This paper is just a first approximation to the issue of *profession-devaluation* of immigrant workers. This issue deserves a more extended research.

\(^1\) The research was financed by IDE-JETRO in 2002. Part of the information included in this paper has been included in the final report published by the IDE-JETRO.
Introduction

This paper introduces some results of the field research, carried on in the prefecture of Chiba in the year 2002, of a larger research. At that time during the in-depth interviews and observations we identified that some informants from Latin American were graduates in their countries of origin but working on ‘non-qualified’ works in Japan. Eight informants illustrate the richness of the experiences these Latin Americans encounter in Japan. The research results suggest a profession-devaluation process for those workers.

A qualitative emergent model, complemented with quantitative official reports, was applied. The model allows us to perceive the particularities of some cases and the relevance of the issue. The project included five months stay in the prefecture of Chiba.

The collection of data was made possible through three sources: documental research; non-participant observation of working conditions and participant-observation in some social activities of Latin Americans (Nikkeijin and non-Nikkeijin); and in-depth interviews to volunteers, relevant officials and Latin Americans who work and live in the prefecture of Chiba.

Some difficulties to access the data are described in the next section. By now it is fair to say that immigration of Latin American to Japan is a very complex issue. The category of Latin American immigrants is still unclear in Statistics, where minor groups are placed in the category of ‘others’.

At first place the researcher tried other approaches such as interviewing in Peruvian and Brazilian convenience stores and restaurants but there were many inconveniences to do so. For example, due to the mobility of workers and high rates of unemployment, there is a noticeable decrease in customers\(^2\). Therefore, the researcher decided to approach informants in an ‘obligatory’ and ‘free’ activity such as attending Religious services on Sundays. An initial sample of twenty-four informants was accessed through attending Catholic mass in two communities\(^3\) Narita, in Spanish, and Mimomi, in Portuguese. We include the following nationalities: Mexicans (4), Colombian (2)\(^4\), Brazilian (4), Argentine (1), and Peruvian (3). However, for this paper we include the words of some of these informants.

\(^2\) Restaurants and stores are also important places to observe the labour market, for example, we find a restaurant well know as to gathering place for illegal Colombian workers in search of work.

\(^3\) In fact the researcher started the fieldwork attending Catholic Sunday Mass at Yotsuya, Tokyo. The mass is in Spanish and attracts many Latin American from nearby communities.

\(^4\) Although ten Colombian were interviewed, only two are considered as in-depth interviews.
This paper divides into three sections. The first introduces the theoretical framework of citizenship in which social rights are regarded as the means to get access to a civilized life, work and education pertaining to this category of rights. The second section introduces briefly the group of Latin American workers in Japan. Some figures of increasing entrance of Latin American are introduced along with some causes of such immigration. In the third section some words of Latin American workers identified in the stage of field work are introduced. Finally we include some remarks.

There are three observed patterns in the incorporation of Latin American graduates to the labour market: 1) their entrance was determined by the need of the Japanese labour market; 2) Contrasting to a decade ago when language was not a requirement to work in Japan lately, as a consequence of a decrease in work posts, a basic proficiency in Japanese Language is required to access work; 3) Language and the system to get professional license to practice professions seem to be determinant to accordingly access the work level that educated Latin American may deserve in Japan. These are preliminary findings. We suggest more extended research on this issue.

I. Social rights of education and work.

The Marshallian concept of citizenship as a basic equality embodied three elements: civil rights, political rights and social rights. 5

‘By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live a life of civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society. The institutions most closely connected with it are the educational system and the social services’. (Marshall cited in Bulmer and Rees 1996: 5).

Out of this definition work arises as means to access a ‘modicum of economic welfare and security’. Marshall defines work as:

The right to follow the occupation of men’s choice in the place of one’s choice subject only to legitimate demands for preliminary technical training’ (Marshall 1964: 75).

However, there is overlapping of some rights. Work is central to civil rights (locating its formative period in the nineteenth century), the right to follow the occupation of one’s choice; it is also central to the achievement of the social right (formative period in the twentieth century) of getting a modicum of economic welfare. In this project, work will be taken as a social right due to it concerns the right to live a life of civilized being.

This perspective allows us to perceive work as a bond that links a citizen to society. It also explains why all citizens are expected to become workers at some stage of their life; otherwise, it would mean their exclusion from society. Marshall refers to work as an

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5 Placing social rights as a ‘coronation’ of civil and political rights arose criticism. Clauss Offe regrets this progressive characterization arguing that ‘social rights are not a smooth coronation but a result of political struggle to achieve them’ (Offe 1984, 94).
attribute of the membership of society (Marshall 1964: 211), such a membership recalls for a homogenous status for every member.

II. Latin Americans in Japan

According to the 2002 Statistical Bureau report Registered Foreigners by Nationalities, South American people (Argentine, Brazil, Peru and others) and Mexican people (under the classification of North America) legally living in Japan are in total 310,764. This figure does not include 300,000 overstay foreigners (www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/zuhyou/b0215000.xls). The entrance of Latin Americans have increased since the amendments of the 1990 Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law that allowed the entrance, work and living to Japanese descendants (Nikkeijin). The immigration restricted to descendants differentiates the Japanese case from other cases since we find diversity of nationalities of origin bounded by Japanese blood. An extensive study on international migration recently published (Hayase 2002) argues that Japan not only has had an increasing trend on immigration but also a diversification of nationalities of origin. We will discuss briefly the context of such an immigration.

In 1991 the Association of Overseas Nikkeis (Kaigai Nikkeijin Kyookai) conducted a comprehensive survey on Nikkei working and living conditions in Japan. 1027 Nikkei from Latin American answered to the extensive questionnaire. The survey allowed identifying some of their characteristics. At that time the Japanese immigrant labour market was clearly distributed among four nationalities; Brazilian was the largest group (62.4%) followed by Peruvian (22.2%), Argentine (9.2%) and Bolivian (9.2%). Table 1 shows the distribution among four nationalities in the period 1980-2000. Mexico is included replacing Bolivian group, which is not included in this report.

Table 1. Latin Americans in Japan

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,492</td>
<td>1,955</td>
<td>56,429</td>
<td>176,440</td>
<td>233,254</td>
<td>222,217</td>
<td>224,299</td>
<td>254,394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>10,279</td>
<td>36,269</td>
<td>40,394</td>
<td>41,317</td>
<td>42,773</td>
<td>46,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>2,656</td>
<td>2,910</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td>2,962</td>
<td>2,924</td>
<td>3,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico*</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>786</td>
<td>1,238</td>
<td>1,551</td>
<td>1,596</td>
<td>1,612</td>
<td>1,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>1,019</td>
<td>1,230</td>
<td>1,297</td>
<td>1,283</td>
<td>1,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,777</td>
<td>3,558</td>
<td>70,734</td>
<td>217,876</td>
<td>279,729</td>
<td>269,389</td>
<td>272,891</td>
<td>306,793</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mexico is regarded as North America along with Canada and the United States of America.

The share of these Latin American nationals is 18.19% of the 1,686,444 foreigners registered in Japan (2002 Japan Statistical Yearbook). From this table it is clear that Brazilian is the largest group, Peruvians the second, Argentines the third. Mexico is included as the fourth because there were Mexican participants in this project. Due to this

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6 This section bases on a part of the research report published by the IDE-JETRO.
7 The results were published in 1992.
8 The successful of this survey was the prize offered: a round airplane ticket to the country of origin of the winner. It was financed by JICA.
distribution, researchers have focused mainly in the Brazilian group meanwhile the other groups have been unattended. This research does not discriminate among nationalities since it is not a representative sample. It includes as many nationalities as possible.

The Prefecture of Chiba reproduces the national distribution of foreigners by nationality of origin. Foreigners are in increasing including the group of Latin Americans. According to data provided by The Catholic Tokyo International Center (CTIC) Chiba Office, in 1975 there were 11,835 foreigners in Chiba. In 2000 this figure increased to 74,969. In other words, 4.7% of the total foreign population of Japan resides in Chiba. The groups of Brazilians (8%) and Peruvians (5%) account for the 13% of the total. Other nationalities, as Mexican, are not specified. Chiba shows national pattern of immigration with Brazilians and Peruvian as the largest groups of Latin American immigrants (Table 2).

Table 2. Latin Americans in Chiba Prefecture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Total Foreigners</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>Peru</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>31,068</td>
<td>2,285</td>
<td>1,122</td>
<td>5,647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>22,507</td>
<td>2,236</td>
<td>1,020</td>
<td>2,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>14,179</td>
<td>1,948</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>2,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>4,728</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>72,482</td>
<td>6,945</td>
<td>3,031</td>
<td>11,681</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I: Ichikawa, Funabashi, Matsudo, Kashiwa, Urayasu, Noda, Nagareyama, Kamagaya, Abiko, Higashikatsushika.
II: Chiba, Ichihara, Yachiyo, Narashino, Mobara, and Chousei.
IV: Kisarazu, Kimitsu, Isumi, Awa, Tateyama, Kamogawa, Sodegaura, Futtsu, Katsura.

III. Some words of Latin Americans graduates in Japan

This section introduces images and words of some Latin Americans who are already leaving and working in Japan. This section intends to share shots of their experiences in Japan. The mean problem we encountered in Japan as to Latin American descendants of Japanese (Nikkeijin) was that they look like Japanese. I am sure that many potential informants passed by my side when I walked on the streets in Japan without noticing them. My appearance clearly distinguished me from the Japanese. However, the situation is more difficult for those Latin Americans who were identified as Japanese in their countries of origin but as soon as they arrived to Japan are identified as foreigners by nationals.

Regarding how similar to Japanese the Nikkeijin look like an officer of a governmental organization clarified to me, They may look like Japanese but they do not understand Japanese language and culture, it is so because they are not Japanese. Something clear from a Japanese perspective, but difficult to cope with for those who were educated for being proud of their linage but encounter discrimination in Japan for being Nikkeis.

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9 A Japanese officer of a governmental organization that launched a training program for foreign workers in Japan.
It is safe to say that Latin American workers get the difficult, dangerous and dirty jobs, avoided by nationals. However, we observed that now a days nationals are competing for those jobs as well. For example, a company located in Narita hires both Nikkeis and nationals for the same kind of work.

‘It is not easy, it is very hot inside the airplane…the work demands you stand up for hours and hours’ (Informant No. 14)

The flexibility provided by Latin American workers is evident. Some of them work the day shift one week and the night shift the next. In the case of workers in cargo area at Narita Airport (Photo 2) there is not clear division between working time and leisure time:

‘I start at 2 p.m. but I do not know at what time I will finish, I work until owarimade’ (Informant No. 12)

Manager of a Service company located in Narita which hires both Nikkeis and nationals.

Peruvian worker in their 50s, he has been working in Japan for ten years. He used to be union leader in Peru. He is a graduate in business.
Latin American workers brought their own religion to Japan. Suddenly Catholic increased in number pushing the church to adapt its services to the new comer’s needs. In Chiba there are about 11,128 Japanese Catholics and more than twice, 23,230 foreign Catholic (Archdiocese of Tokyo Report: 2001). This fostered, in the prefecture of Chiba, to have two services in Portuguese and four services in Spanish at least once a month (http://www.ctic.jp). Catholic church is also coping with daily life problems such as those related to labour and education of children. In small town those who attend mass are usually co-workers as it is the case of Mimomi.

Regarding the decision to emigrate to Japan, a male Colombian (Photo 3) married to a Nikkei explains:

‘If coming to Japan was a mistake then going back to Colombia would be a greater mistake’. (Informant No. 10)

The same informant explain that his fate is in God’s hand. That is his final answer to the question about the pertinence of coming to Japan.

Physical appearance seems to be related to the kind of work Latin American can access (Photo 4). It seems to constraint whether or not the Latin American would be in contact with costumers as is the case of working in a bakery, restaurant or coffee shop:

‘I could not get that employment at the bakery shop. They told me I look very different as to be attending people face to face’. (Informant No. 18)

Her husband who looks like Japanese replies:

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12 Colombian man in his 40s. He is a textile engineer. He works in the construction industry. He looks burned by the extended hours of sun exposition.

13 Female Argentine married to an Argentine Nikkei. She is in her 40s and has been in Japan for 11 years. She is a very active member of a Volunteer Association of Chiba to promote Latin American culture and Spanish language.
‘If you look like Japanese then it is easy to get a work in any restaurant or coffee shop, do you remember that Thai woman who serves in the restaurant?’ (Informant No. 19) 

Photo 4: Nikkeis from Peru and Argentina

Twelve years has passed since the 1990 amendments to the immigration act, Nikkeis are ageing along with the nationals in a very contradictory situation, sharing a company identity and excluded from any benefit such as pension:

‘I work for cargo in Narita, in fact I wear the working clothes of Japan Air Lines…No, I do not receive any social benefit…’
‘About my future?… I do not want to think about that now, the time will come to take decisions’

(Informant No. 12)

Japanese language seems to be difficult to learn at adulthood. A large proportion of Nikkeis do not command such a difficult language. However, there are some of them who are able to speak and write beyond basic level as the Informant No. 7 who is a volunteer and official translator of Portuguese-Japanese.

‘I conquest the Japanese, because I speak Japanese’ (Informant No. 7)

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14 Male Argentine Nikkei who looks like a Japanese. He has been in Japan for 11 years.
15 Female Brazilian in her 40s who has been living in Japan for ten years. He is a graduate from business and occupied high rank position at a financial service company in Brazil.
There was an informant who earn his life in Mexico as a elementary school teacher but in Japan all that knowledge is redundant:

‘You see, we have diplomas but here we are just illiterate, we cannot read, we cannot write, we cannot even speak in Japanese’. (Informant No. 21)  

For children school seems to provide the chance to learn such a difficult language and to become a part of the society. Therefore, children are able to communicate with each other in Japanese even when their first language is Spanish.

The contacted informants from Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Brazil are graduates from university or have a short careers such as nursery or education sciences. However, there is an impossible revalidate those careers in Japan, mainly because the differences in the

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16 Male Mexican Nikkei in his 60s. He was primary school teacher in Mexico but in Japan he consider himself as illiterate.
curricula and language. Despite their professional training they work on non-qualified works:

‘You are the only one who works in Japan in your field. I am a physician and he is a lawyer’. (Informant No. 11)\(^\text{17}\)

‘I was advised to come to Japan by cousins...I earned more in Mexico at that time...But I wanted to explore Japan...I will not go back to Mexico’ (Informant No. 22)\(^\text{18}\)

For these Latin American Japan fulfilled, at least partially, the dream to improve their life. Now they are transferring such a dream to their children. Therefore, going back to their countries of origin seems to be perceived as in detrimental for their children raised and educated in Japan:

*I want my daughters stay in Japan, why should they go back to Mexico? the situation there is getting worst day by day*. (Informant 8)\(^\text{19}\)

There are some exceptions to these stories patterns. A Mexican in his 30s arrived to Japan seven years ago holding a tourist visa after pursuing a MBA in California. He worked as a waitress in some restaurants. He get acquaintance to a Japanese who worked in a financial service company. That person changed his life. He is working as the director assistant of a large financial company. His English language proficiency seemed to be relevant for this case. I met him in a party, he was speaking in Japanese to other guests.

**Final Remarks**

As we mentioned above this paper intends to attract attention toward the issue of professional devaluation that Latin American workers face in their insertion to the Japanese labour market. It seems that language is the main obstacle to access the labour market. However, successful cases as the one we mentioned at last, may suggest that the obstacle is related to the international acknowledge that the degree has in Japan. This first approach to the issue of professional devaluation suggest that the relationship between the social rights of education and work as means to access a civilized life moves into national boundaries. Beyond national boundaries that relationship seems to be not valid. However, it is necessary to do an extended research on this issue to clarify the factors that may lead to a better use of the human capital that Latin American may represent for developed countries as Japan.

\(^{17}\) Mexican physician who works in the cargo area of Narita airport.

\(^{18}\) Male Mexican Nikkei in his 40s. He is a lawyer but in Japan he sells used cars.

\(^{19}\) Female Mexican who is a nurse in Mexico and work packing lunch in Japan (*Obento*).
References


The Catholic Tokyo International Center (CTIC) (www.ctic.jp)