

Understanding the Environment for Japan's Globally Competent Human Resources

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Japan has been facing numerous socioeconomic challenges – declining population through low birth rate and a rising elderly population, increased national debt, competition through globalization – that are placing great pressures on society to provide for itself. In trying to face these challenges society relies on socioeconomic institutions (government, higher education, and business) and the people that comprise them to offer solutions and guidance. However, government, higher education, and business seem to be emitting contradictory signals. The purpose of this commentary is to frame the current environment in which graduates from Japan's university system find themselves. Informed by a completed case study that investigated how one company valued study abroad from students recruited from a national university, this essay does not purport to answer questions for society as a whole, but instead, it tries to raise salient points of inquiry that can be used for further research. Researchers should take a critical eye at how Japanese society is training its global human resources so they can make certain Japan adequately competes in a hyper-connected world in this current wave of globalization.

Key Words : Global Competence, Case Study, Japanese Higher Education, Government, Business, Global Jinzai, Global Human Resources

1. Introduction

Adam Smith (1904/2003), author of *The Wealth of Nations* said,

Whatever be the actual state of the skill, dexterity, and judgment, with which labor is applied in any nation, the abundance or scantiness of its annual supply must depend, during the continuance of that state, upon the proportion between the number of those who are annually employed in useful labor, and that of those who are not so employed. The number of useful and productive labourers, it will hereafter appear, is every where in proportion to the quality of capital stock which is employed in setting them to work, and to the particular way in which it is so employed (p. 3)⁽¹⁾.

The above quote expresses the idea that balance is necessary in all things. When the balance is lopsided, the consequences will inevitably favor one side over another. In the context of economies or the labor market, it can easily be seen that balance is necessary for improvements to occur and for societies to be productive. The bottom line is, balance is necessary for society to move forward and be productive.

Smith expands on the idea of there being a necessary harmony between capital and labor, asserting that the nation-state, while attempting to achieve a certain balance of actions and policies as a means of achieving a particular vision of success, often falls short of that vision. Smith says:

Nations tolerably well advanced as to skill, dexterity, and judgment, in the application of labour, have followed very different plans in the general conduct or direction of it; and those plans have not all been equally favourable to the

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greatness of its produce. The policy of some nations has given extraordinary encouragement to the industry of the country; that of others to the industry of towns. Scarce any nation has dealt equally and impartially with every sort of industry (p. 3)⁽¹⁾.

These excerpts from the initial pages of Smith's extensive treatise on micro and macroeconomics established an idea that while the balance of capital and labor is necessary to move a society forward, implementing the action plan comes with an equally fair share of convergent and divergent actions between principle players – government, business, and academia.

Sometimes there is pressure to perform a certain way. This pressure yields a distinct reaction. The dynamic of this relationship causes situations of congruence and disconnection between integrated societal and economic (socioeconomic) systems. Identifiable socioeconomic systems are the central government, the business sector (the market, Japan, Inc., industry), and academia (higher education, universities). The choice of these particular socioeconomic systems is not random. Yonezawa (2007, 2014)⁽²⁾⁽³⁾ identified government, the market, and academia as systems within Japan that have been instrumental in shaping society during this challenging age of globalization.

Societies are not static entities. They are essentially systems within systems within systems. Each society has a dynamism all its own. In Japan, the central government, higher education, and the business community are three important entities positioned to deal with socioeconomic problems that result when Japanese society tips out of balance. In an effort to illuminate and understand the relationship between these entities, this essay focuses on the context of one university attempting to implement its own vision and action plan against the backdrop of globalization and Japan's larger socioeconomic issues that eventually made their way to the campus of the case university.

Universities do not exist in isolation even though they often have a life and culture all their own (Kezar, 2001)⁽⁴⁾. Other entities such as business and government pressure university administrators into decisions that affect university communities and society at large. Mizuno (2011)⁽⁵⁾ observed that in Japan businesses have been retooling their hiring practices, placing pressure on Japan's higher education system to find ways "to make Japanese students more knowledgeable and competent based on international standards" (p. 34). According to Amin (2012a)⁽⁶⁾, since the global financial crisis in 2008, corporate Japan has taken into account the global talent pool when planning recruitment activities. The situation "provided Japanese companies with the insight that over reliance on the domestic market would prove disastrous in the long term" (p. 1)⁽⁶⁾. In this context, Smith's (1904/2003)⁽¹⁾ insights are critically relevant.

An intensified focus on the global talent pool has prompted Japan's central government to implement policies encouraging higher education institutions, primarily four-year colleges and universities, to innovate through internationalization of curricula (Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology [MEXT], n.d.; Tsuneyoshi, 2005; Yonezawa, 2003; Yonezawa, Akiba, & Hirouchi, 2009)⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾⁽⁹⁾⁽¹⁰⁾⁽¹¹⁾. Policies and programs developed by the central government and Japan, Inc. to build a globally-competent workforce through the internationalization of higher education were designed to overcome multiple socioeconomic challenges facing Japan. Current demographic trends that indicate a declining birthrate and rapidly aging population are anticipated to overburden Japan's economy and social welfare systems thus compounding a socioeconomic structure that is also weighed down by a national debt over 200% of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Chandler, Chhor, & Salsberg, 2011; Yonezawa et al., 2009)⁽¹²⁾⁽¹¹⁾. Central to overcoming Japan's socioeconomic problems is a coordinated effort between business, government, and academia (Funabashi, 2011; Reid, 2011)⁽¹³⁾⁽¹⁴⁾. However, the interaction of corporate Japan's rigid and formalized talent search, *shukatsu* (Amin, 2012a, b, & c)⁽⁶⁾⁽¹⁵⁾⁽¹⁶⁾, the government's internationalization policies for higher education, and the culture of Japanese higher education could be causing tensions that limit the progress of a more coordinated and unified effort (Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Lee-Cunin, 2005; Murphey, 2011; Tabuchi, 2012; Tanikawa, 2011, 2012; Tsuruta, 2003)⁽⁷⁾⁽¹⁷⁾⁽¹⁸⁾⁽¹⁹⁾⁽²⁰⁾⁽²¹⁾⁽²²⁾.

2. Contextual Framing

This essay is derived from a larger qualitative case study that focused on how companies valued study abroad when recruiting students from a Japanese particular national university, and how students at that university understood the concept of global competence (Malcolm, 2018)⁽²³⁾. Pertinent to this essay, however, is the historical context that set the stage on which the study was performed. To begin, an overview describing Japan's post-World War II economic rise, decline, and subsequent stagnation will be given. The historical narrative will set the stage for understanding the socioeconomic challenges Japan has been facing since the 1990s when the nation's main economic health indicator – the Nikkei225 stock index – took a sharp decline ushering in decades of economic contraction and stagnation (Chandler et al., 2011)⁽¹²⁾. The concluding sections include a discussion on global competence in Japan, and final thoughts about what this contextualization means for Japan.

2.1 An Overview of Japan from WWII through the Present

Japanese culture developed through historical interactions with other nations like China, the Netherlands, Great Britain, the United States, etc. (Dower, 2010; The Ohio State University, n.d.; Tsuruta, 2003)⁽²⁴⁾⁽²⁵⁾⁽²²⁾. Japan's ability, in the wake of World War II, to fuse western democratic and market-based principles, industrial manufacturing techniques, and corporate top-down culture with traditional Japanese ideals, concepts, and culture of master-apprentice relationships, tightly controlled supply chain management, and a strong work ethic played a large role in the phoenix-like rebirth of its society, and in particular its economy (Benedict, 1946/1989; Dower, 1995, 1999, 2010; The Ohio State University, n.d.)⁽²⁶⁾⁽²⁷⁾⁽²⁸⁾⁽²⁴⁾⁽²⁵⁾.

An example of Japan's post-World War II economic rise is its high-speed rail passenger transportation system – the Shinkansen. Prior to World War II, Japan had an industrial-consumer rail system resembling that of the United States. Johnston and Pulling (2007)⁽²⁹⁾ stated that after the war devastated Japan's rail system, the Japanese took the mode of transportation pioneered in the United States and created an effective and efficient high-speed rail system. Japan's high-speed rail passenger system, and other industries – automotive, precision machinery, etc. – put the pieces in place for decades of economic growth and expansion (The Ohio State University, n.d.)⁽²⁵⁾.

Throughout much of the 1980s Japan was an expanding economy reaching new heights practically every day. An indicator of Japan's economic prowess during that time was the soaring value of the Nikkei225 stock index, which is an adjusted yen value listing of the top 225 most liquid corporate stocks in the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange (Nikkei Inc., 2011, 2013a)⁽³⁰⁾⁽³¹⁾. This list not only contains Japan's 225 most buyable and sellable corporate stocks, it also indicates the relative strength of Japan's industrial sectors. According to the Nikkei, Inc. (2013a)⁽³¹⁾, for over 60 years the Nikkei225 “has been followed as a barometer of the market or state of the economy” (p. 2, section 1)⁽³¹⁾. Nikkei, Inc. developed the Nikkei225 to provide information to assist stock analysts and traders in setting benchmarks for the creation of financial equity instruments.

By tracing its points balance, any interested party can navigate Japan's economic narrative. Nikkei, Inc. (2013b)⁽³²⁾ provides a detailed history of its balances, thus laying out the ups and downs of Japan's economy. At the start of 1981, the Nikkei225's opening price was 7,150.95, a value that would see great increase over the decade. Between 1981 and the end of 1989, the Nikkei225 index price grew 31,764.92 points to close at 38,915.87. The following year, however, saw the Nikkei225 close at 23,848.71 (Nikkei Inc., 2013b)⁽³²⁾, officially bringing an end to almost a decade of economic growth and prosperity. The 1980s saw Japan attain status as the world's second largest economy. Subsequent decades would see that status diminish, as Japan eventually relinquished second place to a rising China (Hamlin & Yanping, 2010)⁽³³⁾.

Japan has experienced decades of recession and stagnation causing doubt over the future of this economic superpower (Nikkei Inc., 2013c & d; Shibasaki, 2012)⁽³⁴⁾⁽³⁵⁾⁽³⁶⁾. The steady decline of the Nikkei225 quantifies and tracks Japan's economic woes. In March 1991, the Nikkei225 reached a high of 27,146.9, which was a sign of an economic rebound, but by the end of 2000 the Nikkei225 closed at 13,785.69 (Nikkei Inc., 2013c)⁽³⁴⁾. The years between 2001 and 2010 saw further decline with the decade's opening price starting at 13,691.49 but closing at 10,228.44 (Nikkei Inc., 2013d)⁽³⁵⁾. The beginning of the next decade continued to see the Nikkei225 stock index contract, falling to an almost historic low of 8,455.35 (Nikkei,

Inc., 2013e)⁽³⁷⁾. Between 1989 and the end of 2011 the Nikkei225 dropped by 30,460.52 points, a more than 300% decline in value (Nikkei Inc., 2013b, c, d, & e)⁽³²⁾⁽³⁴⁾⁽³⁵⁾⁽³⁷⁾.

The decline of the Nikkei225 and Japan's economic malaise manifested itself in the country's global economic status being downgraded. China, a country that suffered at the hands of a once bellicose Japan, has replaced it as the number two economy in the world based on nominal GDP calculations (Bergmann, 2012; Gray, 2017)⁽³⁸⁾⁽³⁹⁾. When purchasing power parity (PPP) is factored in, Japan falls further on the global economic chart (World Bank, 2017)⁽⁴⁰⁾. Even though the Nikkei225 has rebounded, levels are nowhere near the heights reached in the 1980s. According to researchers at the International Monetary Fund [IMF] (2016)⁽⁴¹⁾, by the end of 2015, "gross general government debt amounted to about 248% of GDP" (p. 43)⁽⁴¹⁾. As of July 2017, the IMF (2017)⁽⁴²⁾ cited Japan's public debt at 240% of GDP – "...by far the highest among the G7 and unsustainable on current policies..." (para. 13)⁽⁴²⁾. With an obvious debt problem, Ujikane's (2013)⁽⁴³⁾ assertion that Japan would most likely have to deal with a stagnant and even recessionary economy for the foreseeable future, seems to be accurate.

The possibility of more long-term economic stagnation will be compounded by two major socioeconomic issues – a rapidly aging population and a declining birth rate. By 2055, forty percent of the Japanese population has been forecasted to be 65 and older (Chandler et al., 2011; Fackler, 2011)⁽¹²⁾⁽⁴⁴⁾. Gross and Adam (2015)⁽⁴⁵⁾ reported for *Public Radio International* that not only did the world's oldest man reside in Japan, but also the world's oldest population with 25% of its 127 million people already over 65 years of age. Writing for the *World Economic Forum*, Hutt (2016)⁽⁴⁶⁾ reported that the population could suffer a fall from 127 million to about 83 million by 2100, with 35% of the Japanese population over 65 years of age. Based on information from the *World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Ageing*, Hutt stated that with Japan being the world's most indebted nation, along with the demographic shift to an elderly society, difficulties in terms of growing the economy were bound to plague the nation.

If Japan is to retain its stature and influence as a leading regional and global economic power, then business, higher education, and government need to work together in a unified and supportive manner. Lack of a unified front places Japan at risk of incurring a second lost generation (Chandler et al., 2011)⁽¹²⁾. Sieg (2010)⁽⁴⁷⁾ ascertained that with one past generation of "young Japanese trapped in unstable, low-pay...insecure jobs as part-timers, contract workers and temps" (paras. 1-3)⁽⁴⁷⁾, the generation coming of age now is under great pressure to prevent a damaging trend. The corporate sector, higher education, and government need to re-think traditional methods of human resource development and strategies of growth that, in the past, brought Japan economic success (Amin, 2012a; Sieg, 2010)⁽⁶⁾⁽⁴⁷⁾.

2.2 Corporate Japan's Talent Search

Japanese businesses large and small have traditionally fueled their labor forces through a deep pool of Japanese graduates from Japanese universities (Amin, 2012b)⁽¹⁵⁾, but since the global financial crisis in 2008, realities have changed. Companies want a more dynamic workforce comprised of "foreign employees who are fluent in English and familiar with local practices" (Mizuno, 2011, p. 34)⁽⁵⁾. Japan's higher education system used to provide capable recruits that companies could build their futures on, but that norm is being challenged. Corporate Japan's talent search may also challenge those university students who take it upon themselves to study abroad with goals of becoming globally aware and getting a job with a Japanese company.

At an event organized by The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, Hiroshi Mikitani, President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Rakuten, Inc., a large force in Japan's online retail industry, was quoted as saying, "30 percent of our fresh graduate hires are foreign employees; some from Japanese universities, some from overseas universities" (Martin, 2012, para. 4)⁽⁴⁸⁾. Oka (2012)⁽⁴⁹⁾, of the Japanese daily newspaper *The Asahi Shimbun*, reported that a spokesperson for Panasonic said the electronics industry giant planned to hire 1,450 people in the spring of 2012; almost 80% would be hired overseas. In the same article, Oka reported that a spokesperson for major convenience store operator, Lawson Inc., stated that since 2008, foreign students who studied in Japan have grown to make up 20% to 30% of its new hires. Company leaders believe non-native Japanese employees with a deep knowledge of Japan will allow for more effective and competitive expansion into foreign markets (Oka, 2012)⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Reporting by Hiroko Tabuchi (2012)⁽¹⁹⁾ of *The New York Times* indicated a possible paradox within corporate Japan's talent search. Officials from various companies had claimed they were seeking globally-minded employees, however, Tabuchi's sources said that native Japanese young people who studied abroad as undergraduates found it difficult, upon return to Japan, to secure employment with Japanese companies. In an attempt to become the globally competent recruits that Japanese companies indicated they desired, students embarked on study abroad experiences overseas, but in an unfortunate twist of fate, that did not seem to be the most effective path to future employment.

The recruits who studied abroad may have been viewed as risky investments in pursuit of short-term personal achievements that would upset the long-term interests of the organization. According to anecdotal evidence in Tabuchi's (2012)⁽¹⁹⁾ reporting, Japanese students who return from studying abroad might be too headstrong and aggressive for conservative Japanese corporate environments. Keiichi Hotta, a recruiter for the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi, alluded to this idea when he said, "We're cautious because we emphasize continuity and long-term commitment to the company...Especially in finance, we don't want people who are focused on short-term gains" (Tabuchi, 2012, p. 2)⁽¹⁹⁾. A situation such as this provides the environment for questioning whether or not study abroad is truly valued as a means to prepare students with the global competence necessary to help businesses achieve their objectives.

The reality of Japan's corporate talent search may be that Japanese companies have heard these stories and do not want to take a chance on Japanese students who studied abroad. Instead, the companies may offer those positions to foreigners who have taken the initiative to study and live in Japan because that indicates their seriousness towards staying in Japan. Foreigners, on the surface, also come with the added benefit of being possible bridges to other cultural markets. To some degree, with government-initiated programs targeting both Japanese university students who want to study abroad and foreigners who want to study and live in Japan, one could suppose that culture in Japan is poised for a change. These realities could be reason for any contradictions and tensions between academia, government, and business. How these entities traverse this situation through their interactions with each other, or lack thereof, will be significant for Japanese society moving forward.

2.3 Japan's University Internationalization

MEXT influences the operations of the institutions that comprise the Japanese tertiary education system. MEXT accredits, oversees, and to a large extent funds anything connected to Japanese education in general, let alone tertiary education (Yonezawa, Akiba & Hirouchi, 2009)⁽¹¹⁾. While reforms have helped make universities more autonomous, there is still intense oversight by the government (Eades, Goodman, & Hada, 2005; Goodman & Phillips, 2003)⁽⁵⁰⁾⁽⁵¹⁾. With industrialized nations like Japan unable to ignore the reality of globalization, higher education is being compelled to adjust (Tsuruta, 2003)⁽²²⁾. In Japan, the pressures and situations influenced by globalization – competition with Japanese companies in the global marketplace, an aging population, low birth rate, high public debt, demands for more capable human resources – mean the central government has to play a role ushering in a new age of operations for higher education (Yamamoto, 2005)⁽⁵²⁾.

Twenty-first century internationalization initiatives by MEXT have been key tools in shaping the global posture of Japanese institutions of tertiary education (MEXT, n.d.)⁽⁸⁾. Specifically, four MEXT policy initiatives have been instituted with the purpose of driving curricula and overall operational reforms in higher education towards a more global approach:

- 1) *Project for Establishing University Network for Internationalization* (Global 30);
- 2) *Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development* (Global 30 Plus or Go Global Japan);
- 3) *Inter-University Exchange Project* (Re-Inventing Japan Project); and
- 4) *Top Global University Project* (Super Global) (MEXT, n.d.)⁽⁸⁾.

The Global 30 initiative was designed to promote internationalization in Japan, increase the number of foreign students who study in Japan by developing courses of study using English as the medium of instruction, and develop international university networks of which all universities in Japan could eventually benefit. The Global 30 Plus initiative was designed to encourage indigenous Japanese students to study abroad thus overcoming what MEXT labeled as the *inward tendency* of

Japan's younger generation. Not only would studying abroad expand the character of Japan's youth, but it would also “foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan's global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations” (MEXT, n.d.)⁽⁸⁾. The Re-Inventing Japan initiative also supports study abroad programs as well as actively building networks with institutions across the world by aligning actual mechanisms of operation like credit standards, course grading, etc. The objective is to build a framework all Japanese universities can utilize. The final initiative, Super Global, is a 10-year (2014-2023) funding program with goals of supporting innovative approaches to tertiary education that will enhance Japan's global competitiveness, and to raise the overall international stature of select Japanese universities as places of global higher learning (MEXT, n.d.)⁽⁸⁾. These policy initiatives, which have come with substantial financial commitments, as well as benchmarks for the qualifying universities, are resources the central government has been using to encourage Japanese universities to internationalize in hopes of producing the future workforce Japan needs for its society to face its socioeconomic challenges.

2.4 Globally Competent Human Resources

Global competence as defined by Malcolm (2018)⁽²³⁾ means to possess the knowledge, skills, experiences, and attitudes that allow one to have the dispositions to identify, comprehend, and act on issues of global, regional and local significance. In taking action, globally competent persons operate using creativity, innovation, empathy, and critically reflexive practices to remain cognizant of their local surroundings and personal places of origin. One drawback with using this, or any operational definition of global competence as a central concept is that little research exists in the Japanese context. Instead, Japanese researchers and others in business, academia, and government seem to be focused on defining *global human resources* and or *global human resources development (global jinzai)*. Yonezawa (2014)⁽³⁾ provided an extensive analysis of the policy debates and practices that have surrounded the term and concept of *global jinzai*. One major conclusion from the research was that the term has become a driving force in shaping tertiary education in Japan. Universities are seen as the place to develop global human resources who are ready upon graduation to assist companies in realizing their global aspirations. What this term means, however, is a bit more difficult to pinpoint (Yonezawa, 2014)⁽³⁾. This essay aligns the concept of global competence with that of *global jinzai*.

There has been an active discussion within Japan's Ministries about what constitutes a globally competent person. The Global Human Resource Development Committee of the Industry-Academia Partnership for Human Resources Development (The Committee) (2010)⁽⁵³⁾, under the auspices of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), defined “global human resources” as people who:

1. think independently;
2. make themselves easily understood by their colleagues, business;
3. acquaintances and customers having various backgrounds;
4. overcome differences in values and characteristics arising from cultural and historic backgrounds;
5. understand others and consider their standpoints;
6. further take advantage of their differences to build synergy and create new values (p. 6)⁽⁵³⁾.

Furthermore, these global human resources should have the following three abilities:

1. To take actions while being aware of the existence of differences in values and communication methods on the basis of diversified backgrounds and histories (=cultural differences).
2. Not judge cultural differences as good or bad, but to be interested in and understand differences and take flexible actions.
3. To recognize strengths of diverse people with cultural differences and to use such strengths for the creation of new values through a synergetic effect (p. 7)⁽⁵³⁾.

The language used by The Committee (2010)⁽⁵³⁾, which advised METI, aligns with the *Global 30* (MEXT, 2009) and *Global 30 Plus* (MEXT, n.d.)⁽⁸⁾ policy initiatives designed by MEXT to encourage higher education to develop curricula that provide real opportunities for Japan's young people to become the globally competent human resources their nation needs.

3. Conclusion

In studying this topic for many years, a few things have become clear to me as a researcher and teacher. One, there is a need for Japan to retool its university student population. Nothing drastic and wholesale, but the need to augment curricula is clear. Universities need to be allowed to change programs with greater flexibility depending on market and societal needs. Currently, the process to change curricula is cumbersome thus causing an aversion to experimentation and creativity within curriculum design and management. This makes universities rely on MEXT initiatives as catalysts for change instead of their own wanted volition. If universities could operate with greater dexterity, without worrying about MEXT audits, they could more actively assist in devising solutions to the various socioeconomic challenges weighing down Japan.

Two, there is a critical tension between government, business, and higher education that can be useful, but also problematic. Within each area there is also critical tension amongst working members. Ministries have their territory, corporations have responsibilities to shareholders and customers, and universities are responsible for preparing youth with the base knowledge, skills, experiences and dispositions to deal with a hyper-connected globalized world. Each create policies that affect the other and cause the other to react almost reflexively when sometimes the reflex is not what is needed. Sometimes what is needed is to slow down, think strategically, and balance long-term needs with immediate goals. This is not easy, but leaders need to address multiple scenarios at the same time in order to move forward constructively.

Finally, based on research by Malcolm (2018)⁽²³⁾, the situation was clear that for one particular university, the staff and students were not aligned with the same knowledge. Career Support Center staff were not aware of the internationalization grant the university received. Staff at the International Affairs Office were not aware of the job hunting (shukatsu) process implemented by the Career Support Center. Students interviewed during Malcolm's research project were not aware of the grant, the principles behind various curriculum changes, or what the concept of global competence meant in relation to them. That was the landscape students had to navigate regarding their future employment and integration into broader society. One where the entities they will work for and rely upon for stability operate in opposition, but also cooperation with each other.

With an ever-increasing interconnected world where borders are shattered, but also erected in hopes of holding on to some familiar culture, students of today will need to know how to navigate this terrain. Teachers need to know how to educate and prepare them for this way of life. Understanding the contextual forces at play was the focus of this essay. Moving forward with continued critical awareness, investigation, and analysis of these contextual matters is a mission on which researchers of all backgrounds and disciplines must embark.

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