

U Access - Long/short japan corporate governance

Quarterly Comment | Q2 2021

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Market Comment

- TOPIX (TR) growth for Apr-Jun was 0.3%. The domestic equity market ended the quarter largely unchanged from the beginning. Positive catalysts, which included heightened expectations for a global economic recovery and strong domestic corporate earnings announcements, were offset by negative catalysts, which included inflation fears and alarm over potential changes in monetary policy.
- The Japanese equity market fell in April because of the announcement of more states of emergency following increased new Covid-19 infections and a vaccine rollout that was slower than in other developed countries. Entering May, the market began to rise on the back of expectations for a global economic recovery and strong domestic corporate earnings announcements, but then experienced a rapid drop on inflation fears following the increase in US CPI. However, the market then rose again as investors regained their nerve following a break in US long-term rate growth. The market then showed weakness on heightened concern over monetary policy. This was a result of news the FOMC had entered discussions about an earlier increase to rates and the implementation of tapering.
- Equity markets continued their rally over the second quarter of 2021, with the MSCI AC World Index adding 7.4% in performance to reach close to 12.5% since the beginning of the year. This rally was supported by the accelerated global roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines and central banks maintaining their accommodative stance. US equities gained 8.2% over the period, while European equities were up close to 6.5% and Emerging Markets 5.0%.
- At the end of June, all sectors of the MSCI AC World Index were in positive territory except for the Utilities sector. The IT and Health Care sectors were the top contributors over Q2. All sectors are also showing strong earnings growth rate expectations.

Sources: UBP, Bloomberg Finance LP.



Performance Review

- During the quarter, the fund performed well, retreating 0.66% in April followed by a very strong May (+ 3.07%), before giving up -0.63% in June.
- After a -4% dip in April in reaction to a pick-up in Covid cases and re-imposition of a lockdown in Tokyo and Osaka, the Japanese stock market regained most of the decline in May and June as the vaccination program gained momentum.
- The strategy performed well in May, rising over 3%. June started off well, with strong performance from the long side. However, the longs underperformed in the second and third weeks. The long side saw some recovery in the last week of June. Nonetheless, the strategy ended the month down -0.63%. This brings the year-to-date return to +4.73%
- In total, the strategy generated positive returns during thirty of the fifty weeks since inception. There were only eight weeks with negative returns larger than -0.50% compared with twenty weeks with returns greater than +0.50%. The maximum drawdown was -2.51%. The cumulative return since inception is +12.41% with volatility of 5.4%.
- Since inception, four sectors made large positive contributions to performance, tech & media, consumer, staples and chemicals. Four sectors (automotive, machinery, utilities and materials) made moderate positive contributions while the electronics and financials sectors made neutral contributions. Only one sector (healthcare) made a significant negative contribution, while transport and real estate made modest negative contributions. In the healthcare sector, the longs have lagged the market whereas the shorts have outperformed. While maintaining strict risk control of the individual position sizes, we remain confident in the governance characteristics, fundamentals and valuation mispricing of our positions in this sector. The healthcare sector's performance has been recovering over the past two months.

Portfolio Activity

- After the strong performance in May, we did a thorough review of the portfolio at the end of June. This resulted in 11 trades, 2 longs and 9 shorts. On the long side, the trades were to take profit on large outperformers. Similarly, 6 of the trades on the short side were to take profit on large underperformers. The remaining three short trades were to switch to more attractive companies after large relative stock price moves.
- The profit taking with exit was in two long positions in the following sectors: automotive (stock up +48%) and machinery (+25% in six months). On the short side, with the market up 26%, we took profit on six short positions that underperformed the market significantly in the following sectors: consumer (underperformed -22%), electronics (underperformed -29%), real estate (underperformed -22%), materials (underperformed -29%), staples (underperformed -30%) and tech & media (underperformed -48%). Each of the names was replaced by another company in the same sector, with appropriate governance and risk/reward characteristics.
- We replaced three short positions with more attractive shorts in the following sectors: electronics (underperformed -5%) and two companies in the healthcare sector (underperformed -12% and -8%). We believe the replacement stocks provide a better risk-reward balance after the underperformance of our previous holdings and the large outperformance of the replacement stocks.

Outlook

- Strong economic data and the momentum of the recovery have been a key driver of equity markets this quarter and with no doubt shall provide continued support. This was evident in the exceptionally strong March quarter reporting period, which saw the average earnings result beat expectations by over 20%. The stellar performance of the market since the drawdown in March 2020 has seen the MSCI World Index rally 93% in USD.
- At this juncture, the investment team believes the June quarter earnings period should also be very strong; however, they balance their constructive outlook by recognizing the potential risks from higher valuations and cost related headwinds, which may dampen medium term expectations.
- The Japanese economy is still in the process of recovering from the slowdown caused by Covid-19. The country's slow vaccine rollout led to a slower recovery than those seen in Europe and the US. However, with inoculations now picking up pace, we expect Japan to soon catch up to its rivals. Japanese corporate profits are in the process of recovering, having fallen because of the negative impact Covid-19 had on the economy. The market is currently in the process of factoring this recovery into share prices.
- We believe the Japanese equity market still has upside potential. This potential, however, is limited because of the shift to tighter monetary policy in the US and the likelihood of slowing corporate earnings growth. We expect the market to experience gentle growth through year-end as investors anticipate an escape from the pandemic.
- For proactive companies, we expect to see increases in corporate earnings over the medium term as further improvements to corporate governance boost capital efficiency and profitability metrics like ROE. We also expect to see further efforts from Japanese companies to expand their international spheres of influence as well as improvements to productivity through digital transformation efforts.

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