# CHALLENGES IN ATTRACTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO JAPAN

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## Abstract

*Japan is an attractive study abroad destination for international students worldwide. However, there are still challenges in attracting international students and internationalization, especially for the universities not enlisted among the top-tier universities, and universities which locate outside metropolitan areas. Despite relative advantages of quality of education, affordable cost, student-friendly environment, and exotic region-specific culture, Japanese universities still face certain challenges in attracting international students. We conducted a literature review to investigate challenges that may hinder attracting international students to Japan's universities. The data showed that there are challenges in maintaining academic ranking and internationalization level, diversifying the student body, securing revenues for operation, regional popularity and disparity, strengthening the supporting system, maintaining cross-cultural exchange and communication, mobilizing scholarship, supporting employment and a part-time job, online transformation, etc. that may influence the efforts for effectively attracting international students.*

**Keywords:** *attracting international students, higher education, internationalization, study in Japan*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Global international student mobility has been expanding consistently, reaching a total number of over 5.3 million international students in 2019 (IIE, 2021; OECD, 2020). Attracting international students has become a crucial strategy for the internationalization of higher education. Influenced by the process of globalization and intensified global competition in the area of education, Japan has strengthened its efforts in attracting more international students since the 90s (Horie, 2002). The Japanese government has paid special attention to attracting international students with quality and diversity as one of the components of the internationalization strategy of HEIs (MEXT, 2013). During the past several decades, Japan was successfully attracted international students with its advantages in science and technology, economic power, and original culture.

Especially in the last decade, the number of international students studying in Japan has increased rapidly. International students consisted of 5.2% of the total enrolled students in Japan (OECD, 2019), reaching 279,597 students as of May 1, 2020, making it one of the major hosts in the world (MEXT, 2021a). In 2021, Japan is the ninth largest host country for international students, taking the share of about 4% of the total international student mobility in the world (IIE, 2021). In addition to its high educational standards and renowned programs in STEM, the increased number of English-taught programs, availability of financial assistance, low tuition fees and living costs, and interest in Japanese culture are the factors that contributed to Japan's international popularity (Shimauchi, 2014). Japanese higher education institutions (hereafter, HEIs) are actively implementing internationalization for staying competitive (Ishikawa, 2011). The Japanese government's drive to attract more foreign students through generous scholarship schemes and the international student support services implemented by most universities (Studee, 2021).

Japanese higher education has evolved from the stage of mass higher education to universal access to higher education (Huang, 2016). Until recently, even though the 18-year-old population has decreased, universities have been able to secure the number of students thanks to the increased college advancement rate, which amounted to nearly 80% of the age cohort (Nakane, 2019). Due to population decline, especially the decline of the university-age population, the Japanese higher education system expects to face a student shortage (Yonezawa, 2019). In this situation, filling the gap in enrolment by recruiting more international students seems to become a solution for Japan's near future.

The central government plays a decisive role in promoting the internationalization of higher education in Japan (Yonezawa, 2009; Takagi, 2016). The initiatives of the governments have contributed to a rapid increase in international student enrollments (Kuwamura, 2009). The 100,000 international students by 2020 plan had been started in 1983 and reached its goals in 2003 (MEXT, 2008) seconded by the 300,000 international student plan which had started in 2008 intending to reach 300,000 international students by 2020. For pushing up the internationalization of HEIs, the government launched the Global 30 project in 2009 for 13 top-tier universities, resulting in more programs in English, promotion activities abroad, and an increased number of international students at the 13 universities (Hennings and Mintz, 2015). After the Global 30 project ended in 2014, the government launched the 10-year Top Global University Project for top-tier universities that aim to either enter the top 100 universities in world rankings or become leaders of internationalization in Japan. Universities funded by the program are required to increase lectures in English and improve the ratios of foreign faculty and students (MEXT, 2021b).

The 300,000 international students plan reached its goals in 2019 (Tran and Jin, 2021a). However, this number includes also non-degree students such as research students and students enrolled in Japanese language schools. which are and compromises degree and non-degree programs: Japanese language students (29.5%), undergraduate students (29%), professional college students (22%), graduate students (17.4%), and others (2.1%) (JASSO, 2017b). Although this plan regarded international students as contributors to the Japanese workforce, the extent to which the Japanese community and universities are ready to accept these international students has been questioned (Rivers, 2010; Rakhshandehroo, 2018).
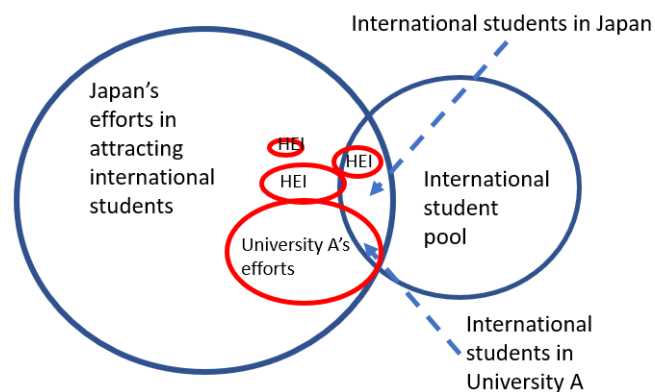


**Fig. 1.** Conceptual framework proposed by the authors

In our previous papers, we looked at factors that attract international students to Japan (Tran and Jin, 2022) as well as factors that push students to take the study abroad decision (Tran and Jin, 2021b). We have shown shreds of evidence for international students to study in Japan concerning the quality of education, uniqueness of culture and environment, affordability, and long-term employment possibilities. Although this evidence explained about the attractiveness of study in Japan that has materialized in the success of Japan to become an international education hub in Asia, few studies have focused on the challenges of HEIs at the national and institutional level that hinder the success of attracting a higher number of international students to go to a particular region or institution in Japan. In this paper, we take particular settings of Japan and investigate the challenges to attracting international students at the national level, which tend to be driven strongly by government policies, and challenges at institutional levels which may vary by locality and institution, by analyzing relevant pieces of evidence to find implications for further study.

## 2. METHODS

We conducted a literature review from publications and reports published in both English and Japanese by public institutions, research institutions as well as media, news articles, forums, and other internet sources. We obtained relevant literature by conducting searches on Google Scholar and other search sites such as ERIC, and Cinii. We set the search to be more focused on the literature after 2010, which could contain the most updated information and the impact of the pandemic. Among the large number of publications found by keywords such as "study abroad, study in Japan, international student, MEXT", we chose the relevant titles and then looked for the information needed by reading the full-text contents.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Academic ranking and internationalization

Students are attracted to high-ranked and prestigious universities. Japan is well-known and attractive to international students due to its advanced level of science and technology integrated into a high-quality education system. The government policies to develop and foster Japan's flagship universities to achieve world-level top rankings, especially in the STEM fields, were proven successful as these universities could able to produce more Nobel laureates than any other Asian nation. Government policies toward creating world-class or flagship universities and concentrating research funds on top-tier universities such as the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University have contributed to this high competitive edge (Lassegard, 2016). In 2022, Japan's universities were generally downranked compared to 2011. This phenomenon could be due to the rise of excellent HEIs from other countries. However, the level of downranking was not the same for all universities. At the institutional level, top-tier universities could maintain their rank, while the lower-tier universities are struggling to their best effort just to not lag behind their current rank (Tran and Jin, 2022). For the flagship universities such as Kyoto University which ranked 57 in 2011 and down to 61 in 2022, the ranking change was insignificant. Of the universities in G30 and the top global group, Osaka University was ranked 139 in 2001, 251+ in 2016, and down to 301+ in 2022. Similarly, Kyushu University was ranked 401+ in 2016 and 501+ in 2022. This group also seemed to downrank minorly. For the universities which not among the top global group such as Tokushima or Tottori university, the decline was more significant, both from 601+ in 2016 down to 2101+ in 2022 (THE, 2021).

Regarding the proportion of international students, the top-tier universities had achieved significant growth in the number of international students enrolled, e.g. Kyoto University had 7% in 2016 but this share increased to 11% in 2022. However, the proportion of international students in the lower tier had been unchanged or even decreased in the same period. E.g. for Tottori University, this proportion remained unchanged at about 2% for the period 2014-2021 (Figure 2).
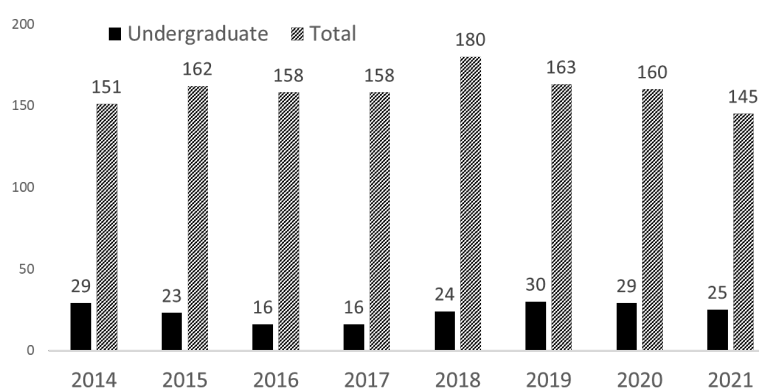
**Fig. 2.** Number of international students at Tottori University

Source: Tottori University's website (adapted by the authors).

A study reported that the Chinese studying STEM in Japan rapidly increased until 2011, then this trend slowdown due to these students becoming more western-oriented (Futagami, 2016). The fact that more than 90% of international students in Japan are from Asian countries has brought some arguments about Japan's scientific achievement declining and its correlation with East Asianization of Japan's science as returned international students could intense competition between Japanese companies and their East Asian counterparts in the same science and technology fields, making a negative impact on Japanese industry (Arai, 2018). It is reported that when higher ranking HEIs are attracting students with good quality and quantity, the lower ranking HEIs must face competition for students (Stigger, 2018).

Regarding the internationalization of Japanese HEIs, the level of internationalization of academic staff could be related to the number of international students and Japanese students go studying abroad. A study conducted at the 37 top global universities had shown that with the increasing trend of the number of faculty staff with foreign experience, which reached a third of the total number of faculty staff at the moment, there was also a corresponding increase in the number of international students which reached about 8% (Kato, 2020). Japanese HEIs are in need to expand their capacity for internationalization. Positions for foreign faculty were gradually opened in the 80s'. However, full-time foreign academic staff often were in contracted or non-tenured positions. The proportion of foreign faculty in Japanese HEIs remained at 3.6% in 2007 (Kuwamura, 2009). Not only in the number, but the role of foreign faculty is also somehow reduced compared to their Japanese colleagues (Stigger, 2018).

### 3.2. Recruiting students outside Asia and recruiting undergraduate students

Until recently, more than 90% of the international students in Japan are from Asian countries, mainly from China, Vietnam, Nepal, Mongolia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Korea, Taiwan, and so forth (JASSO, 2021). Among millions of Japanese language learners worldwide, only a quarter of them are from outside Asia (Japan Foundation, 2012). Since the later 1990s, the East Asianization of international students in Japan rapidly gained momentum. It was argued that the achievement of the 100,000 student plan was largely due to the deregulation of immigration policies and the economic disparities of neighboring countries such as China and South Korea, as Japan was considered a country where international students can study while working part-time (Mozumi and Kazuyo, 2010). In the 2010s', while fewer Korean and Chinese students come to Japan due to improved economic situation and affinity to western countries, another wave of students from Vietnam, Nepal, and other Asian countries rapidly filled the seats of Japanese language schools, where they could study and work part-time, then continue their study in vocational college and eventually looking for a job in Japan (Ryu, 2017). Some authors argued about the policy of accepting students from developing countries for the delining number of Japanese students may improve the capacity and academic performance issues in the short term, but may be an unsustainable strategy because these students may hamper Japan's science quality, then emphases promoting the cooperation with Western countries to improve Japan's science quality (Arai, 2018). As students from other parts of the world such as Europe, Africa, or the US usually come with Japan's government scholarship or foreign government scholarship, which is available in a very limited quota, it is very challenging to increase the share of non-Asian students without ensuring scholarship options. As a case, it was reported that students in Bulgaria may have the intention to study in Japan if they could get a MEXT scholarship, while none stated intention to study in Japan as a self-funded student (Tran and Marinova, 2020).

As mentioned above, for compensating the shrinking domestic market of students mainly at the undergraduate level in the future, there is an increasing need for recruiting international students to fill the space. However, at research universities such as most national universities, the number of undergraduate students hardly increased over years. In the case of Tottori university, we could observe a low proportion of undergraduate international students, which remained unchanged at around 2% over the years (Figure 2). In a recent survey regarding admission and graduation paths of international students, the number of direct enrollees from overseas to graduate schools has increased remarkably, but at the undergraduate level, the actual number increased, but the ratio has decreased (Futagoishi, 2021). The reason behind the low enrollment at the undergraduate level lies in the fact that there are

almost no undergraduate courses with full English instruction until recently, while students from abroad are not sufficient enough in Japanese for undergraduate study. The high hurdle of Japanese language proficiency required for admission makes it difficult to enter the undergraduate course in Japan. Students have to attend Japanese schools in Japan for one or two years, and only those who could get sufficient Japanese proficiency to pass the entrance exam can enter an undergraduate program. But in fact, students who finished Japanese language school in Japan often choose to go to colleges of technology or vocational school rather than go to university. For example, 35,432 students who finished Japanese school in 2019 went to a college of technology while only 11,385 students went to an undergraduate course at university (Futagoishi, 2021).

In theory, it is possible to apply for enrollment in a Japanese university directly from abroad using the pre-arrival admission system, but in practice, still few international students have successfully entered Japan by using this system. For promoting the enrollment of international students from abroad, the JASSO introduced the examination for Japanese university admission for international students (EJU) in 2002. EJU includes the tests: Japanese as a foreign language, science (physics, chemistry, and biology), Japan and the world, and mathematics. Applicants select subject tests to take based on the requirements of the HEI in Japan that they want to enter. Currently, a total of 900 HEIs in Japan, including 479 universities are using EJU for student admission, and almost 200 HEIs are offering pre-arrival admission using EJU (JASSO, 2022). Although no report was found about how many students used the pre-arrival admission by EJU, in 2019, 6325 students were admitted to a master's course, while 6929 students were admitted to undergraduate courses directly from abroad (Futagoishi, 2021). However, as EJU examination sites are not available beyond neighboring countries to Japan, the pre-arrival admission system is still not yet ready to be used for students outside Asia.

### 3.3. Financing

Japan's expenditure on education as a proportion of GDP is one of the lowest among OECD countries. There is some criticism that the declining budget for scientific research and the number of researchers, Japan's scientific output may go down, and it could be difficult to maintain the current level of cutting-edge science and produce Nobel winners (Hirohata, 2018). With the incorporation of national universities since 2004, there has been a gradual drop in the amount of government expenditure in the national and public sectors. On the other hand, the government has increased the amount of competitive funding, including both research project grants and special budgets for national projects. Since then, national and public university corporations have been requested to increase their revenues by expanding income-generating channels. Figure 3 shows the change in the total budget for operation expenses provided by the government to national universities, which decreased from JPY 1,241.5 billion in 2004 to JPY 1,107 billion in 2020. For obtaining research funds through competitive funding, the researchers have to plan for research and apply for approval. In this way, the researchers' chance to get the research budget is uncertain, as for the JSPS fund the successful rate is as low as 27.9% (JSPS, 2022).

While the incorporation of national universities could be seen as a positive approach to promote competitiveness and autonomy, it also could become a hurdle that discourages accepting researchers and graduate students, including international ones. It may aggravate the hierarchical structure of HEIs, widening the gaps related to academic and financial status (Huang, 2016). There is a disparity in budget allocation even within the national university sector, depending on HEIs' history, prestige, number of students, etc. The top-tier HEIs such as imperial universities and a few elite private universities are allocated more public funding than other universities (Huang, 2016). For a long-term research project, a failure to get the competitive funding fund may result in interruption of the research project and hinder the chance to accept international students for working on this project. This situation influences negatively the internationalization process of HEIs. As for the HEIs which can not get the government fund for internationalization or the ones outside the flagship groups such as "global top universities", they have to struggle with an annual decrease in an operating budget which may come to cut down costs and activities to maintain the balance. In some cases, the universities may cut down costs for internationalization activities.
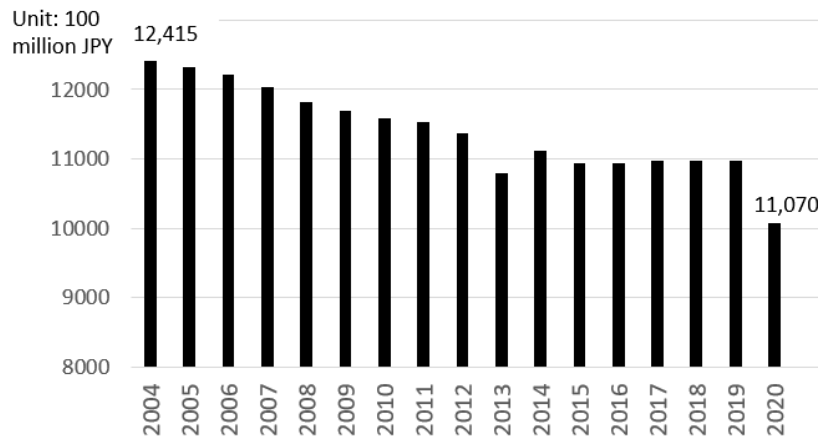
**Fig. 3.** Total government budget allocated for National Universities' management

Source: MEXT, 2020 (adapted by the authors).

Tuition fee is a major revenue channel for HEIs. While tuition fees are relatively high in Japan at about US$5000 for public HEIs, the share of tuition fees paid by international students remains so far insignificant. In the case of national universities, most of the international students come from Asian countries and 95% of them are self-funded students, who are qualified for tuition exemption fully or partly (Yasue, 2018). With the declining number of local students and insignificant tuition fees collected from international students, revenues from tuition fees are expected to gradually decline. Ensuring scholarships for the increased number of privately-funded international students became challenging. While the number of government scholarship recipients is already at the peak level of 9,229 recipients in 2019 (JASSO, 2021), mobilizing more scholarship resources for the increasing number of privately funded students is a difficult task. While the portion of self-funded students is drastically increased, the total number of scholarships for self-funded students envisioned by the government to support a contingent of 100,000 international students remained unchanged. Universities have to make efforts to collaborate with industry or private funds to ensure some extra funding (Zhu and Takahashi, 2016).

*3.4. Cross-cultural exchange and communication*

A huge number of efforts have been made for promoting more exchange and communication between international students and Japanese students. For example, the elements of cross-cultural communication guided by Japanese students had been integrated into the Japanese intensive course could achieve some awareness and metacognition of students (Sonoda et al., 2006). It has been reported that environments such as dormitories could facilitate friendship development. By making students follow the rules in the dormitory such as using nicknames and doing the duties, sharing the kitchen and bathroom, and spending time together through activities such as events and meetings in the dormitory, the relationship between exchange students and Japanese students changed into friendship (Yamakawa, 2013). Another scheme to intensify intercultural exchange is to assign student-tutors, who assist in the life and learning of new international students who will experience cross-cultural contact through building relationships with international students. The assigned tutor is expected to approach the international with compassion and understanding and but sometimes it is difficult to develop such a relationship into a natural friendship (Ioana, 2019). It was reported that in this kind of cross-cultural contact, the tutors may face difficulties in positioning the interpersonal relationships with international students, recognition of the causes of the difficulties, the required level of social skills and motivation for learning, and may need support (Tanaka, 1997). Sometimes it is difficult to recruit tutors to take the roles as requested. There are also other initiatives such as cross-cultural lessons, club activities, an international chatting room, lunch exchange, etc. (Arita, 2004). Usually, international students who come short-term tend to have higher satisfaction in international exchange. Exchange students are more likely to involve in exchange activities, as they suppose to stay

short-term in Japan and pay more attention to experiences rather than academic knowledge, and tend to get more satisfaction (Hennings and Tanabe, 2018).

The university-initiated approaches described above could reach some results, but the challenges remain such as lack of sustainability, difficulties to recruit tutors and club members, and difficulty to involve graduate students. It has been reported that the interaction between international students and Japanese counterparts is low, due to the language barrier, no interest from Japanese students, lack of exchange platforms, etc. (Shin and Toma, 2019). Besides the language and cultural barriers which make it difficult for the students to interact, lack of motivation to make interaction from the international students' side due to limited Japanese proficiency or from the Japanese students' side due to lack of incentives. Some initial efforts for enhancing awareness to make Japanese friends have been reported (Hyashi, 2009). Usually, international students don't seem to join club activities with Japanese students, and most claimed the difficulty to make Japanese friends. Even now, we can still see the situation of international students being "separated" from mainstream students. One of the causes is that even though international students strongly hope to interact with Japanese students, they have no Japanese friends (Arita, 2004).

### 3.5. Part-time job and employment

The expansion of Japanese investment and industries abroad has led to a higher chance of employing student-returnees with higher salaries (Hirasawa, 2019). The open economic market in foreign countries brings better economic conditions for returnees. Studying abroad in Japan becomes more affordable while domestic education becomes more expensive may drive more students to choose to study in Japan. Decades ago, the high living cost was the biggest challenge for self-funded students to come to Japan (Fujii and Masami, 2003). However, recently, fewer international students perceived high living costs, and the economic situation of international students seems improved, as the number of international students who need counseling on financial problems is declining (Oka, 2018). It was reported that a part-time job is a factor that attracts international students (Shizuka, 2015). A part-time job is the first experience of being a worker and a good opportunity for socialization to start thinking about the value and career of money, obligations, and responsibilities in society (Wakabayashi 2006). Students active part-time for more than two years have higher scores for social skills (Iseri, 2013) and higher career development (Sekiguchi, 2012). Part-time job activities are expected to promote the socialization of foreign students living in Japan, and at the same time, deepen their understanding of Japanese culture and enhance their Japanese-style interpersonal relationship abilities (Lin and Horiuchi, 2021). International students are 80% active in doing a part-time job, not only for income but also for work experience & practicing Japanese, career development (Itoh and Hiruma, 2019) cultural understanding (Huang, 2018). Recently, due to economic improvement, problems related to part-time jobs have declined and some self-funded students afford to not work part-time. However, still some rely on part-time jobs for most living expenses (Oka, 2018). It seems that self-funded international students tend to prefer metropolitan areas since there is more chance to find part-time jobs.
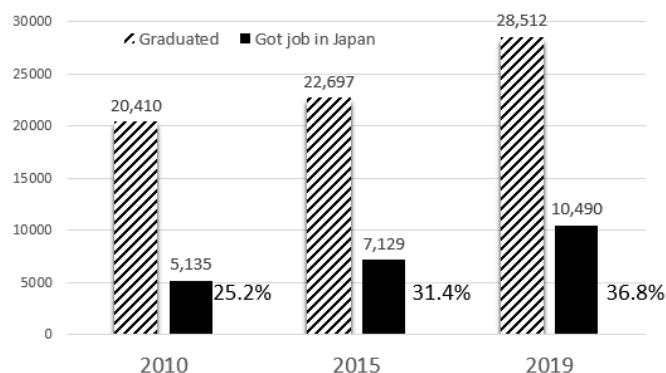


**Fig. 4.** Employment rate of international students who graduated with a degree in Japan

Source: JASSO 2019 International Student Career Survey (adapted by the authors).

Japan's strategic view toward international students had shifted from seeing them as temporary visitors who would leave Japan after graduation (Kuwamura, 2009) to considering them as a potential human resource. Measures are being implemented to facilitate job hunting in Japan for international students. In 2012, a points-based system to facilitate the immigration of highly-skilled foreign professionals was introduced. Since 2016, a program for fostering employment of international students was implemented in 12 universities, aiming at raising the employment rate of Japanese international students from 30% to 50% (MEXT, 2017). In recent years, the need for employment in Japan tend to increase among international students and the success rate is not matching the demand yet. In 2017, 63.6% of international students want to work in Japan, but only 30.1% found a job (JASSO 2017). Local social support from civil groups to international students has become an important factor in promoting the job-seeking intention of international students. Studies have shown that those who succeeded in employment won social support and they could do their job hunting in the same way as Japanese students (Fujimoto, Urasaka, and Moriyama, 2014). Figure 4 shows the trend of international students' employment in Japan, which increased from merely 25.2% of the respondents found a job in Japan in 2010 to 31.4% in 2015 and reached 36.8% in 2019. However, most of the graduated students have found a job in urban hubs such as Tokyo, Osaka, Kanagawa, Aichi, Saitama, and Fukuoka (JASSO, 2019). The fact that fewer students are settled in rural areas shows a clear disparity in the destination of employment for international students.

*3.6. Regional and institutional popularity*

The country of Japan is very popular and attractive to foreigners as it has a fascinating culture, beautiful sites, deep-root traditions, and festivals. There are almost four million learners of the Japanese language worldwide. According to survey data, people are learning Japanese because they are interested in manga, anime, J-Pop, history, literature, future employment, study in Japan, culture, sightseeing, and taking examinations (Japan Foundation, 2012). For international students, Japan has an image of convenient life, anime, Sakura, beautiful streets, politeness, cute stuff, and Akihabara (Yang and Yasuhisa, 2019). Countryside Japanese people became more active in perceiving multicultural issues, and cross-cultural understanding. Taking an example, in Tokushima prefecture, residents are active in learning about cross-cultural issues by interacting with foreigners (Tran, 2020; Tran and Matsuura, 2020). Reports from programs implemented in the countryside areas showed that international students enhanced their sense of attachment to the local community, as well as the residents gained the mind of supporting international students (Yamauchi and Morio, 2021).

While Japan as a whole is an attractive destination for international students, not all localities have the same level of attractiveness. There are more than 1000 HEIs in Japan, excluding vocational schools (Table 1), which vary with a great degree of diversity and different levels of attractiveness to international students.

|            | University | Junior College | Technical College | Total |
|------------|------------|----------------|-------------------|-------|
| **National** | 86         | 0              | 51                | 137   |
| **Local**    | 94         | 17             | 3                 | 114   |
| **Private**  | 618        | 308            | 3                 | 929   |
| **Total**    | 798        | 325            | 57                | 1180  |

**Table 1.** Number of HEIs by type and sector (Source: MEXT 2021).

Often each locality possesses a different arsenal of sightseeing spots, well-known food, and specialties, well-defined customs, festivals, etc. The disparities between the localities and geographic regions give the competitive dynamics in regional development. As such, the popularity of the locality is important for attracting international students (Isashiki, 2013). Still, most international students are attracted to urban areas. Tokyo metropolitan areas alone host more than a third of the total number of

international students in Japan, while more than a half of international students are settled in Tokyo, Osaka, and Fukuoka regions (JASSO, 2020). The preference of students to choose to stay in big metropolitan areas poses very serious challenges to HEIs located in non-metropolitan areas to attract international students when considering the choices between the urban and non-urban areas. In areas possessing a rich uniqueness of nature and tradition but facing a declining population, international students could be seen as resources to revitalize the locality (Sato, 2012). Studies have shown that foreign residents enjoy more human relations and Japanese learning in rural areas, however, there are also inconveniences such as transportation (Fukada, 2019). Relative low cost for daily life, rich natural resources, and unique traditional culture are some attractive features of non-metropolitan localities that allow international students to lead a slow lifestyle and concentrate on studies. However, declining population, lesser chance for employment, and less number of the part-time job are disadvantages. Usually, the collaboration between the university, local government, and companies is strengthened in localities, which results in stronger support for international to settle in (Sato, 2012).

Unlike universities in the metropolitan areas where they could choose good students to fill their maximal capacity, non-metropolitan universities sometimes have less choice to select the best students but rather fill the capacity with international students (Kakiuchi, 2018). Therefore, sometimes the low motivation of students and loose management of the non-metropolitan universities may hinder the academic performance and Japanese proficiency of the graduates (Akasaka, 2014).

## 4. DISCUSSION

In this paper, we looked at the context of Japan and investigated the challenges to attracting international students at the national level, which might be driven strongly by government policies, and challenges at an institutional level which might vary by locality and institution, by reviewing relevant shreds of evidence. We proposed a conceptual framework to separate the national level of attracting international students as the big circle on the left, and the institutional level of attracting as the smaller circles inside the big circle (Figure 1). The national share from the international student pool indicates a result of the national effort, while the share of each institution within the national share indicates the institutional effort, which contributes to the total national share. Sometimes, these HEIs seem to work in no conflict, independently or in collaboration with each other, such as in the case of pulling students directly from abroad each institution has to develop its international collaborative network and participate in promotional events abroad. Sometimes, these HEIs are competing with each other for gaining a greater share of students. Although there seems to be no decisive evidence, it seems that the top-tier universities and universities locate in metropolitan areas have the advantages in attracting international students and the disparity may grow wider in the future.

We dug inside this framework for finding the challenges that these HEIs may face to attract international students. While top-tier HEIs could maintain prestigiousness and attractiveness to international students, it may need harder efforts for the lower-tier HEIs to keep their pace and narrow the gap in campus internationalization. Diversifying the student contingent by increasing the number of students from various countries and continents and balancing the number of undergraduate and graduate students seems a very challenging task for even top-tier HEIs, and these issues seem not possible to be solved any soon. The challenge with decreasing government allocation is putting pressure on all national and public HEIs, but it also triggers competitiveness among concerned HEIs, as lower-tier HEIs may have a chance to close the gap. Regarding strengthening cross-cultural communication in campus, which relates not only to international students but also to local students, the hurdle of promoting diversity seems still hard to overcome. Numerous initiatives have been implemented to overcome the invisible segregation between international students and local students such as share-room, tutor system, and local supporters with some success, regardless of the level of HEIs. Regarding support in job hunting, although HEIs in non-metropolitan areas put a huge effort into supporting alternatives students, it seems difficult to retain them to get a job in the same locality, as students tend to find employment in metropolitan areas. Within this paper, we were unable to identify all of the challenges to attracting international students and unable to access all of the evidence from the literature. The results we found may imply the need to go deeper and refine the

research to every category of challenge, design surveys, and propose intervention models for resolving these challenges.

Looking beyond the framework in Figure 1, as a non-English-speaking country standing in the lack of regional framework such as the EU, Japan might be in a disadvantaged position to attract international students (Yonezawa, 2009). We can find similarities in the challenges between Japan and Germany (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Grote, 2019) related to propagating information and marketing abroad, internationalizing domestic education, and strengthening the support system for international students. However, Germany, as well as other major host countries, seems to be in a better position since it could take the advantage of EU integration to attract international students from EU countries via schemes such as Erasmus (Breznik and Skrbinjek, 2020). Bulgaria, as an example, also is considering EU integration as a strategic priority of its internationalization plan of higher education and focuses mainly on attracting exchange students from EU countries, an approach that came out from a very detailed SWOT analysis of each institution (Tran and Marinova, 2022). In the case of Japan, although most of its international student assets are from Asia, the rise of neighboring countries is often viewed as competitiveness rather than an opportunity for regional collaboration (Yonezawa, 2009). The economic decline could be seen as a threat to hamper internationalization efforts and the development of global human resources. The high-paced economic development of Asian countries could also be considered a threat to Japan in terms of attracting international students. East Asian countries such as China, and Korea are already on the track to achieving high global competitiveness in higher education, following similar approaches to Japan such as strong government-initiated policies and programs for enhancing competitiveness. China already surpasses Japan in certain criteria such as the number of inbound international students and total scientific output (Hammond, 2016). As different countries may take different approaches, it may need further comparative studies to compare strategies for attracting international students to Japan and other countries, including Anglophone countries, EU countries, Asian countries as well as other major host countries worldwide.

Like other major host countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has made an impact on the inbound international student mobility to Japan. Since January 2020, measures such as travel restrictions by the Japanese government, and canceling non-regular courses have had a significant impact on non-regular courses such as universities, preparatory courses, and Japanese language education institutions. In 2020, international student enrollment in Japan decreased by 4.9% overall in HEIs, excluding Japanese language, technical, and vocational schools, still to a lesser degree compared to the other host countries (MEXT 2020b). A survey conducted in November 2020 at the "Top Global University" group reported a decrease in the number of international student enrollment (MEXT 2020a). The international students who were unable to travel to Japan have had to take online classes distantly. In 2021, although travel restrictions had been relieved, most of the self-funded international students were still not allowed to enter Japan yet. However, the decrease has mainly been in short-term international students, while the number of degree-seeking students has increased (Nakasato and Kayashima, 2021). For the post-Covid period, the lasting effect of the pandemic on student mobility to Japan may push up further development and institutionalization of online learning, considering the value of online learning as a tool for internationalization. Expanding online courses will put Japanese universities in competition with other universities at the global level, raising concerns such as language barriers and teaching styles (Nakasato and Kayashima, 2021). It may become challenging for the HEIs to stay competitive in attracting international enrollment in the new flat education world. As the rise of online education could lay a major impact on the current situation of international student mobility, this issue should take place on the topic agenda for further research.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Japan is an attractive study abroad place for the world's international students. Although its popularity, there are still challenges to attracting international students and internationalization, especially for the universities not enlisted among the top-tier universities, and universities which locate outside metropolitan areas. In this paper, we reviewed the challenges at national and institutional levels in attracting international students. By examining related studies and literature, we identified some

challenges to attracting international students to Japan. Despite relative advantages of quality of education, affordable cost, student-friendly environment, and exotic region-specific culture, Japanese universities still face certain challenges in attracting international students. The data show that there are challenges in maintaining academic ranking and internationalization level, diversifying the student body, securing revenues for operation, regional popularity, and disparity, strengthening the supporting system, maintaining cross-cultural exchange and communication, mobilizing scholarship, supporting employment, and a part-time job, online transformation, etc. that may influence the efforts for effectively attracting international students. These results may imply the need for conducting further research to come out with initiatives and intervention models for resolving the issues, which could make Japan a great destination for international students over the world.

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