

*Being an International Student in Japan 2020-2021:
Impact on Their Career Prospects*

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Abstract

Under the coronavirus pandemic, its impact on student life and teaching styles have often been discussed worldwide inside and outside the education industry. However, in Japan, while its impact on economic relations of Japan with Asian countries has often been analyzed and discussed, its impact on Asian students in Japan and their career prospects has not been examined enough. This research discusses what difficulties and changes international college students in Tokyo have had since 2020, taking in their points of view in terms of career prospects. The participants of this research are study abroad students from Asian countries in Japan who currently belong to a language college in Tokyo. The questionnaire reveals problems they have faced inside and outside the classroom and how they changed their career prospects referring to their academic background and original plans. The support which hosting colleges and universities in Japan are expected to provide is also discussed.

Keywords: Study Abroad, Higher Education, Professional Training College, Career

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Introduction

While the hardship of university students under the coronavirus pandemic has often been focused on not only by researchers but sometimes the media, the discussion examining the impact on students in other higher education institutions, such as in professional training colleges, has been discussed much less. Moreover, under the state of emergency and the restriction of travelling, international students in Japan have been under huge stress and anxiety not only about their studies but also their future plans. In 2020, most higher education institutions in Japan moved fully online, which was the same with the college where the researcher worked. Soon after the college started full online lessons, the students started contacting teachers more than usual and shared their concerns. In the teachers' meeting, how to practice student support was one of the common concerns. Since, there were 79,598 international students studied in professional training colleges in Japan¹, there are a number of people in higher education institutions who felt the necessity of getting these students' voices. This paper firstly overviews the position of professional training colleges in Japanese higher education, then focuses on a particular college in Tokyo and international students there, and analyzes their major concerns from students' points of view and discusses the possible solutions.

Higher Postsecondary Education Enrollment Rate

According to the report published by OECD in 2019, over half of Japanese adults between 25 and 64 years old have attained higher education, which is higher than the OECD average. Focusing on 25-34 years old in Japan in 2019, about 60% of them enrolled in higher education². This is the second highest rate in Asia, with South Korea in first place with 70%. This high percentage has been one of the characteristics of Japan's higher education. In 2020, over 80% of secondary school graduates in Japan progressed into higher education, which may result in the fact that having higher education degrees is not considered something special but a requirement for participating in the Japanese labor market. In 2020, nearly 55% of secondary school graduates went to university while over 16% went to professional training colleges.

Professional training colleges are classified as higher education institutions and are called "senmon gakko" in Japanese. Students in these colleges generally study for particular skills and practical knowledge for 2 years or more and get a diploma when they complete the course. This study focused on a college which has been offering language education and has both an English department and a Japanese department. Besides the foreign language college at which this study was conducted, there are different types of professional training colleges such as the ones offering vocational training programmes for nurses, mechanics, chefs, animators, designers and professionals in the hospitality industry.

However, due to the declining birth rate in Japan, the proportion of the population aged 18 is declining, and according to the data published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), as a result, the expected number of 18-year-olds who progress into higher education institutions including universities is decreasing and expected to continue declining³. The shrinking market size is one of the triggers for the government to

¹ The data cited from "2020 (令和2) 年度外国人留学生在籍状況調査結果"

<https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/ja/statistics/zaiseki/data/2020.html> (accessed 03.06.2021)

² The data cited from "Population with tertiary education" <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm> (accessed 03.06.2021)

³ The data cited from "将来構想部会 第13回配付資料 大学への進学者数の将来推計について"

https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo4/042/siryu/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/03/08/1401754_03

promote university reforms. It has been proposed since the 1970s and the recent proposal revealed that the government shared the vision of improving Japanese universities focusing on financial support for students, quality of education, research environment, and governance⁴. Besides the top-down education reform, universities and colleges have conducted their own structural reforms and introduced not only new courses and curriculums but established new student supporting systems focusing on student welfare and career support. Thanks to the increasing number of career supports and the recovery of Japanese economy, according to data by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW), the rate of university graduates before the pandemic was 98.0% and 96.8% for professional training college graduates. However, the rate on February 2021 went down to 89.5% and 76.7% for each in 2021⁵.

Being Homogeneous

Another thing which OECD reviews pointed out about higher education in Japan was how “homogenous” it is. The report stated that Japan has a relatively low share of adult and international students there, which the government is currently working to improve through the university reform plan and to have more diversity.

Despite the promotion of university reforms, the homogeneity in Japanese universities and moreover, the homogeneity in the recruiting system for expected graduates has stayed the same. For example, the day when the major companies can release the recruiting information and start interviewing new expected graduates has been decided through discussions between the Japan Business Federation, universities, and the government. In 2021, March 1st was the day that the major companies were allowed to start posting the hiring information and June 1st was the day they can start interviewing. In Japan, the academic calendar starts in April and ends in March next year. Therefore, most of Japanese university students who enrolled in April 2017 started applying for jobs in the spring of 2020, and got offers, and then graduated from universities in March 2021. They directly started working in April 2021.

The number of international students in Japanese higher education institutions was increasing until the coronavirus pandemic happened in 2020. In 2021, Japanese higher education institutions still have nearly 300,000 international students, and as it is previously mentioned, more than 79,000 are in the professional training colleges. The biggest group of international students is Chinese students, which makes up more than 40% of the total, followed by Vietnamese, Nepali, Korean, and Taiwanese students. The students from these Asian countries make up nearly 80% of international students in Japan.

The report published by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) described that about 65% of international students in Japanese universities wish to get jobs in Japan. Although the number of international students who got jobs after graduating from Japanese universities were constantly increasing⁶, only 35% of international students got jobs in Japan in 2018.

.pdf(accessed 03.06.2021)

⁴ The data cited from “Reform of Higher Education and Research (Shibayama Initiative) ~ Integrated promotion of education and research reform at institutions of higher education ~”
https://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/other/detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2019/08/201413322_03.pdf
(accessed 03.06.2020)

⁵ The data cited from “令和2年度大学等卒業予定者の就職内定状況調査（令和3年2月1日現在）”
<https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/11804000/000752873.pdf> (accessed 03.06.2021)

⁶ The data cited from MEXT (2019) “外国人留学生の就職に係る現状”
<https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2019/02/20200228007/20200228007-2.pdf> (accessed 03.06.2021)

Japan's employment rate for new graduates marked the highest in both 2019 and 2020. However, the national target of international students' employment rate was 50%. Considering these facts, the problem of lack of career opportunities for international students is not fully caused by the coronavirus pandemic but has been an existing problem in Japan. A recruiting agency DISCO, which also provides the recruiting service for expected university and graduate school graduates from overseas in Japan, conducted the survey among the users and showed that about 30% of them managed to get job offers in July 2020⁷. Considering the fact that more than half of the samples were graduate school students, we can imagine how much international students struggle to get jobs in Japan.

Participants

The participants of this study were international students in the English department of a professional training college in Tokyo. The department had about 100 students and more than 10% of students were adult students who had already had job experience before enrolling in the college. About 20% of students were from overseas although the percentage changes every year. The curriculum was designed to focus on developing students' communication skills in English. After students complete a 2-year course and get a diploma, about half of them directly transfer to universities and continue studying. The other half get jobs such as in hotels, travel agencies, airlines, or private language schools, or as receptionists in the office. These jobs do not need a university degree but need high communication skills in English.

The first questionnaire was designed for 30 students in the final year, both international and local, and to get the information about the percentage of the employment rate. The department conducted a survey about job hunting for final year students whose plan after graduation was getting full-time jobs in February 2021, which was a month before their graduation.

The other questionnaire was for students in a Japanese language class aimed at collecting more detailed information about their difficulties. There were a variety of topics including online lessons, assignments, life outside school, future plans, finances, visa, family and homeland. These topics are not always independent but related to each other. In order to support these students, firstly two questionnaires were conducted in February 2020 and then the researcher interviewed the participants for research and counseling purposes. The information collected was sorted to figure out what difficulties the international students are facing under the pandemic. The participants for the second questionnaire were 13 international students who registered in a class preparing for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, which is an international Japanese language exam and often called "JLPT." JLPT has five levels from N1, the most advanced level, to N5, the beginner. Many higher education institutes put an N1 certificate as one of the required documents for application. The class in which participants were all registered was designed for pre-N2 to N1 level students and it was not a compulsory class. It could be stated that the participants were motivated students who study not only English but also extra Japanese for getting N1 or N2 certificates. According to the JLPT website, N2 certificate shows the ability to understand Japanese in everyday situations, and to a certain degree⁸. It is also true that a number of job advertisements for international students state "N2 is required." In fact, the college which the participants belonged to requires all the international

⁷ The data cited from 株式会社 DISCO “外国人留学生の就職活動状況” https://www.disc.co.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/fs_2020-08_chosa.pdf (accessed 03.06.2021)

⁸ The data cited from JLPT “N1-N5: Summary of Linguistic Competence Required for Each Level” <https://www.jlpt.jp/e/about/levelsummary.html> (accessed 03.06.2021)

students to pass N2 exams before they graduate. In the classroom, there were 4 students from China, 4 from Vietnam, 2 from Korea, 2 from Uzbekistan, and 1 from Bangladesh. More than half of participants had already graduated from higher education institutions in their homeland before they came to Japan. The academic backgrounds were as follows: 5 students with secondary school certificates, 4 with diploma, and 4 with bachelor degrees. The youngest participant was 19 years old and the eldest one was in her 40s. For job experience, 5 students had already had full-time working experience in their homeland while 4 students had part-time job experiences in their homeland. 4 students did not have any working experience before they came to Japan. Almost all of them have had part-time jobs while they were studying in the professional training colleges in Japan.

Findings: Questionnaire 1

The data collected from 30 students showed that only 63.3% of them got job offers. As described before, the graduates often get jobs in hotel, travel, and airline industries, all of which were under the serious recession due to the pandemic. This may be one of the major reasons for the lower employment rate of the graduates this year. Among these 30 students, there were 11 international students: 6 from China, 3 from Vietnam, 1 from Korea, 1 from Myanmar, and only 3 got job offers before they graduated. It should be noted that all these international students were over 20 years old who had already completed their secondary education in their homeland and 6 of them had completed their undergraduate programmes in their homeland before they came to Japan. The three students with job offers were the ones who came to Japan as college graduates with working experience. On the other hand, other international students who did not get offers were various: not only the ones who came to Japan as high school graduates with no job experience, a high school graduate with full-time job experience, but also college and university graduates with working experience. Considering the situation and their background, it may be obvious that the job hunting was severe regardless of their academic and career background.

Findings: Questionnaire 2 & Interview

The questionnaire was conducted in Japanese and was designed to figure out what changed and affected their life significantly in 2020. Their concerns were categorized in the following five topics: school, social life (life outside school), future plans, finances, family and homeland. For example, the concerns labeled “school” included the ones related to online lessons, assignment, and learning, which 11 out of 13 students mentioned and were the most popular topics. Even though the questionnaire was conducted during the final exam period, these topics were the main concerns for students. Also, once school closes and moves fully online, it is so easy for international students to miss opportunities to have daily and casual chats in Japanese and talk to Japanese classmates.

The second most popular concern was the ones related to life outside school including their part-time jobs. In the interview, most participants mentioned the fact that they lost their part-time jobs under the state of emergency since the most popular part-time job industry among students was restaurants. For most participants, part-time jobs were the only places where they could form relations with Japanese people outside school and can directly feel Japanese society and customs. Losing part-time jobs under the state of emergency and economic recession means losing a connection with Japanese society.

In the interview, the participants described their plans after graduation. Regardless of their English and Japanese proficiency level, age, and class, most participants described how they needed to change their initial plan. Changing their career plan is not just changing the type of jobs. It is sometimes about scholarships, further education, and leaving Japan. For example, as it was previously mentioned, the most popular career path for this college's graduates used to be getting a full-time job in the travel and tourism industry or airlines. However, one student from Korea said "The diploma from the English Department or English skills do not help me get jobs much."

Many participants mentioned the financial difficulties due to the loss of part-time jobs and economic recession in their homeland. It was not just the participants but students all over Japan regardless of nationalities who suffered a sudden financial difficulty. In May 2020, under the pandemic, the government decided to support students with financial difficulties through the Emergency Student Support. These situations surely affect their plan for further education. For example, having fewer part-time job shifts in the restaurant, a student faced financial difficulty and considered applying for a scholarship, which she never thought of as an option before the pandemic hit. Without scholarships, she said she needs to think about getting a job and giving up further education. Another student stated that, due to the coronavirus pandemic in his home country, he cannot ask for financial support from his parents. He changed his mind about progressing into university and started job hunting to get a full-time job in Japan as soon as possible. One student from China with a bachelor degree had been initially planning to work in Japan after graduation. However, she decided to go back to her country and get a job in which she can use the Japanese language.

Discussion

Now two major problems are examined. One is the uniqueness of the job hunting system in Japan and the difficulty of making the information and the knowledge visible for international students. As described above, Japanese job hunting itself is very homogenous and unique. People who grow up in Japanese communities may not realize and see because it is too obvious. But international students have less background knowledge and need to be taught about preparation, scheduling, language, and behavior. Also, the fact that only 35% of international students got the offer even before the pandemic may tell us that the information arranged for international students is originally less and more improvement should be discussed.

The other problem is the connection with Japanese society. Although there are a lot of research such as Darvin (2016) conducted to examine the change of identity and communication of people with the development of the digital technology, one of the things the pandemic showed was how easily international students lose their connection with Japanese society once the school is closed and they lose the opportunities of having face-to-face communication. The problems became visible through their concerns about life outside school. When the pandemic is over and schools get back to the in person lessons on campus, they might be able to have more opportunities to have a connection with classmates and teachers more easily. Also, the students have more chances to get involved more in Japanese society once the economy is back and they get part-time jobs. However, the fact that the international students tend to lose their social life and career opportunities once the school closes or they lose their part-time jobs does not change. Moreover, the fact that their financial status is less secure under the terrible economy when we compare them to our local students does not change regardless of their academic background. Considering that these problems have been there for many years even since before the pandemic occurred, we could say that the pandemic made these existing

problems more visible.

Therefore, how the school can provide the support should be discussed. Following are the comments from students and things the international student office or teachers can help. These questions can be solved when they find the right person to ask in the school. However, once the school closes, it is difficult to find contacts. Schools should be aware of this.

“I would like to know whether a school can provide career support service even after I graduate.”

“I wanted to have more chances to study in the real classroom on campus. I could more casually talk and visit people to talk about job hunting. But during a full online period, we are losing the chances for casual chat. Now I want to visit the school office and get information about job hunting in Japan.”

“I lost my part-time jobs. So now I only talk with my roommates. They are from my country. So I lost the chance to speak in Japanese.”

“My question is about how to renew my visa. My friends who graduated last year said the visa would be sponsored by the company. But I do not have a job offer yet. And I do not know who I should talk with about this problem.”

In order to tackle these problems, the school should be aware of firstly the fact that the school is the place for learning not just subjects but also Japanese society for international students. Although the international office and the admin office were the professionals of students' registration and support, once school closed and moved fully online, teachers were the only adults for students who could share their concerns. As many researchers such as Richards (2020) pointed out, language teachers can often play the key roles of sharing experiences and emotions with students in the classroom. This close tie may result in making students easier to share about their concerns with language teachers rather than other teachers and staff. Also, how easily international students lose the connection to the society once they close.

Conclusion

The tendency of being homogeneous can be seen not only in higher education in Japan, but also very much in the process of job hunting for expected university graduates and their career perspectives. How to hunt jobs is quite different in each country, even in neighboring countries, and this may be a worrisome problem for students, especially for the young students who try to get their first full-time job. Moreover, these difficulties caused by cultural homogeneity cannot be visualized for local people. Teachers in higher education institutions do not often commit students' job hunting and just focus on teaching. However, teachers are the ones who have opportunities regularly to talk to students even during the online period. Considering these facts, the system which supports international students' lives should be developed by school, teachers, and the recruitment professionals sharing the issues. More and more studies focusing on international students and their whole career path should be conducted.

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