Factors Pulling International Students to Japan: A Situation Analysis

Tran Hoang Nam, Tokushima University, Japan
Jin Cheng-Hai, Tokushima University, Japan

Abstract

Japan has 312,214 international students in May 2019, successfully achieving the 300,000 international students target. This study investigates the factors pulling international students into Japan for higher education. Data for literature review was collected from mainly Japanese sources including research reports, review papers, statistics, and online materials, which addressing the issues of international students' mobility into Japan from 2008 until present. Data was reviewed qualitatively by comparative analysis, comparing the literature with the elements of 300,000 international students plan and the pull factors from the push-pull model. The results showed specific measures in strengthening campus internationalization, expanding international cooperation and alumni network, improving supporting services, diversifying scholarship schemes, job hunting support etc. could be considered as effective pulling factors. Moreover, while these factors could be applied effectively by some universities, it is hard for other universities to follow the same approach. The results imply obstacles to the mid-ranking public universities to attract more international students and the need to improve this situation.

Keywords: Study in Japan, International Student, Pull Factors

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Global international student mobility has been expanding consistently in the past two decades. In 2018, 5.6 million students worldwide went abroad to study, more than twice the number in 2005 (OECD, 2020a). The question of why students are pulled to their education destination overseas has been a long-time topic for studies conducted in various settings and circumstances. The most common theory for investigating the study abroad destination outcome is the "push-pull" model, which sees decision about destination of study abroad as the result of push factors, which exist within the source country and push students to go abroad, and pull factors, which come from the host country, or host institution and attract students to the host (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In the past, the host country is often representing a technology advanced country, often a western and English-speaking country which seems attractive to students from developing countries (Figure 1). However, by the end of 20th century, emerging countries in Asia are making success to increase the international students' share (Kuroda et al., 2018).

Since the end of 19th century, Japan become an Asian model of modernization and therefore received attention of surrounding countries. The first Korean students came to Japan in 1881, while the first Chinese students came to Japan in 1896 (Maruyama, 2011). Students from these countries had been attracted to Japan because of geographical proximity and cultural similarity. After the second world war, Japan had been emerging as a world economic power. Technological advance and unique culture provide Japan with more ability to attract international students, especially remarkable during the last two decades. Recently, number of international students studying in Japan, especially from Asia, has increased drastically, making it one of the top host countries in the world. As students from various countries are pulled to Japan for higher education, in this paper, we take a particular setting of Japan as a host country for international students, and investigate the pull factors at national level, which tent to be related to historical context and its transformation through out the whole process to reach the current magnitude and pull factors at lower levels which may vary by region, prefecture, or institution.
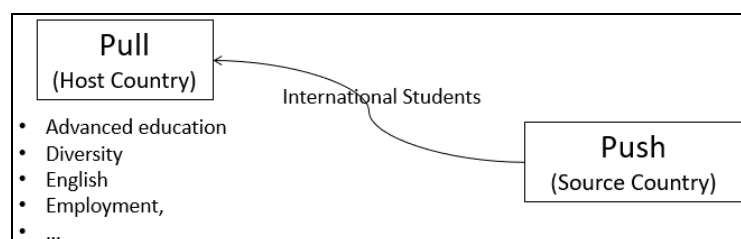

Figure 1: Pull Factors Attracting International Students

It could be observed from the past that the studying abroad outcome has been strongly influenced by push and pull factors. In our previous review, we proposed five push macro factors model that pushes students abroad (Tran & Jin, 2021). However, push factors alone could not explain why international students choose Japan as a destination. The attractiveness of study in Japan is become visible to the world, however, there is still little understanding about what are the pull factors that attract international students to Japan, and what are sub-national pull factors that make international students to decide to go to a particular region or institution in Japan. This paper is aiming to: (1) identify pull factors of study in Japan; (2) find evidence of pull factors from literature and implications for further study.

Method

In this work we investigate pull factors from available literature. The literature search was conducted mainly by Google Scholar and other search engines such as Google, ERIC, Cinii. The search ranged mainly from 2000 to present. We did a literature review from documents, publications and reports published in Japanese language by Japan's public institutions, research institutions as well as public media, new articles, study abroad forums and other internet sources. We found a huge number of papers by the keywords selected (Table 1). Then we selected the papers that have full text and content that satisfied our information needs.

Table 1. Google Scholars Search Results (Japanese, Title, Phrase)

Keyword	Japanese	All	since 2017	since 2021
Study abroad	kaigairyugaku	7,100	2,040	277
Study in Japan	nihonryugaku	4,100	961	124
Int'l students	ryugakusei	83,800	12,800	1,700
Int'l students (in Japan)	gaikokujin ryugakusei		7,430	903
Japan gov. scholarship	nihonseifuushougakukin		1,990	218
Int'l st. w J gov. schol.	kokuhiryugakusei		473	52
Private int'l student.	shihiryugakusei		504	60

The pull factors exist in Japan are of particular interest in this paper. Pull factors are the items specific to a host country, such as economic power, level of influence, diaspora of immigrants etc. In this paper, we searched for pull factors according to several sources including general pull factors, socioeconomic factors, which are available at national level, factors specified by Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) and policy-related pull factors as specified by "300,000 International Students Plan". Besides the factors above, we also look at socio-economic factors such as low fertility, regional revitalization, foreigner communities, etc.

Results

Transition of International Students in Japan

After the World War 2, Japan had become a study destination for students from many nations, such as Malaysia, Brazil, Thailand, and Singapore (Maruyama, 2011). Japan had made a proactive move to internationalize higher education following OECD's suggestions in 1971. There had been two major government initiatives which contributed to drastically increase of international student enrollments (Kuwamura, 2009). The Nakasone's plan in 1983, which aimed to attract 100,000 international students by 2020, had reached its goals in 2003. This plan was focusing on nurturing Japanese identity of Japanese students, and it targeted the international students as temporary visitors who would leave Japan after their graduation. From 1996 to 2000, the "10,000 Postdocs Plan" had been implemented to provide funds to research institutes to create 10,000 doctoral degree holders placed in a competitive environment in the research world (MEXT, 2002).

In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) formulated the "300,000 International Students Plan". This is positioned as a part of a global strategy that aims to increase the number of foreign students studying in Japan to 300,000 by 2020, opening Japan to the world and expanding the flow of human, goods, capital, and information. This plan had been focusing on the global competitiveness of Japan and aimed

to cultivate global human resources of its domestic students. From 2009 to 2014, the Global 30 (G30) Project aims to internationalize higher education in Japan through collective programs and policies of its 13 member universities. Since 2014, the government introduced the Top Global University Project for prioritized support for university reforms until 2023. Top Global Universities are categorized into 13 Type A (Top Type) universities that conduct world-leading education and research; and 24 Type B (Global Traction Type) universities that lead the internationalization of Japanese society (MEXT, 2021).

The 300,000 international students plan had reached its goals in 2019. However, this number includes long-term and short-term students (less than a year education in Japan), 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 (Rakhshandehroo, 2018; Rivers, 2010).
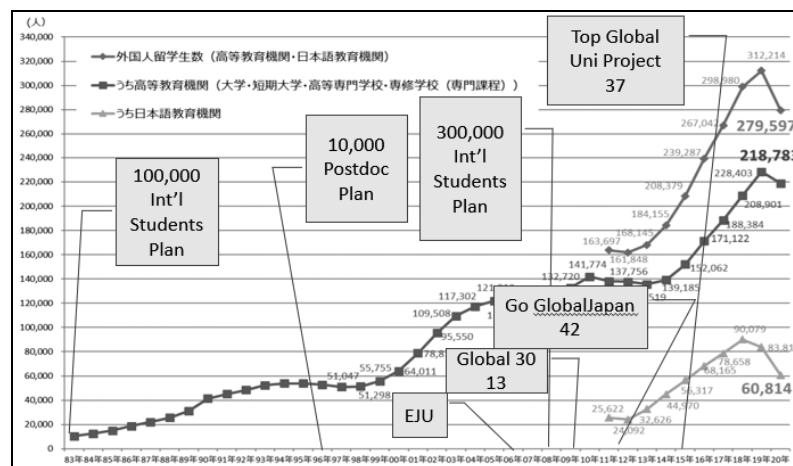

Figure 2: International Students in Japan (Source: adapted from MEXT, 2021)

Despite the efforts, the share of international students in Japan, at 3.4%, is also lower than the OECD average of 5.6% (OECD, 2020b). In May 2020, total number of international students in Japan is 279,597, decreased by 10.4% from 312,214 of the previous year (JASSO, 2020). The largest sending countries were China with 121,845 (down 2,591 from the previous year), Vietnam with 62,233 (down 11,156), and Nepal with 24,002 (down 2,306). This decreased number of inbound students was heavily influence by Covid-19 outbreak. The number of international students includes students who were unable to travel to Japan at the scheduled time because of the Covid-19 pandemic and were forced to take online classes overseas. While the number of non-regular courses such as universities, preparatory courses, and Japanese language education institutions has decreased, the number of regular courses and vocational schools of universities and junior colleges is increasing. Travel restrictions had been taken by the Japanese government since January 2020, resulted in canceling or postponing acceptance, mostly had impacted non-regular courses. Since March 2021, it was decided to continue this measure for the time being, except for "special circumstances", even after the state of emergency was lifted. For students such as government-sponsored students, as "special circumstances", entry will be resumed on condition that necessary measures are taken (MEXT, 2020). Among the total international students in 2020, 219,000 students entered higher education institutions (approximately 136,000 at university/college, 400 at college of technology (senko), 80,000 at vocational school, 3,000 at preparatory course), and

about 61,000 students entered Japanese language schools (JASSO, 2020). Figure 2 shows the rapid increase in number of international students during the last several years until the outbreak of Covid-19.

Looking at general pull factors, at first, we will describe the evidence of pull factors as world class education, rich nature and culture, affordable costs, socioeconomic (population decline), supportive environment, employment opportunities.

Factor 1. World Class Education

Japan is known for its cutting-edge science, technology, and medicine. Japan was able to grow economically and become a leading country in manufacturing precisely because of the advanced knowledge and technology fostered by its excellent education system. Japanese schools focus not only on academic achievements but also on the development of human quality (JASSO, n.d.). Japan is known to have excellent universities, especially in the STEM fields, able to produce 29 Nobel laureates and 3 Fields medalists, more than any other Asian nations. However, there seems a global decline of Japan's university ranking.

Table 2. Ranking of Japan's Universities by Times Higher Education

	University	*2011*	*2016* *Int'l Stud (%)*		*2020* *Int'l Stud (%)*		*2022* *Int'l Stud (%)*	
G30	Tokyo	26	43	10%	36	12%	35	14%
	Kyoto	57	88	7%	65	9%	61	11%
	Osaka	130	251+	9%	301+	11%	301+	11%
	Kyushu		401+	8%	401+	13%	501+	14%
Non G30	Tokushima		601+	3%	1001+	3%	1201+	3%
	Tottori		601+	2%	1001+	2%	1201+	2%
	Ryukyus				1001+	2%	1201+	2%

Looking at the figures of national universities, in Table 2, Japan's university ranking in 2022 according to THE was generally downranked compared to 2011 (THE, 2021). Comparing the G30 and top global group and the non G30 group, the former seems to keep their ranks stable or even up during the past years, the latter seems much downranked. Regarding the proportion of international students, the G30 group has achieved significant growth during the last years, while the non-G30 group shows no improvement. Decrease in number of international students is typical for any non-G30 and non-top-global universities (Figure 3).
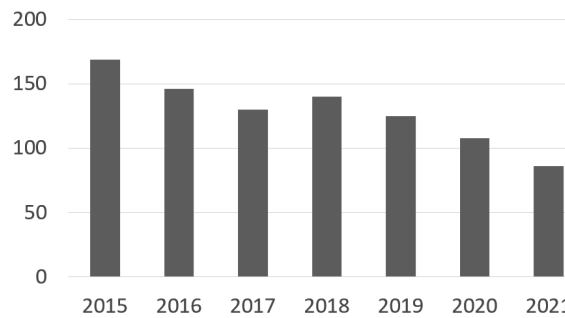
Figure 3. Number of International Students (Source: Kochi University)

However, a study reported that Chinese studying STEM in Japan rapidly increased until 2011, then this trend did slowdown due to the students have becoming more western-oriented (Futagami, 2016). In Japan, a phenomenon called east asianization (Figure 4) rapidly gained momentum in the latter half of the 1990s. Accepting more international students from developing countries to compensate for the decreasing Japanese students may serve to increase academic performance in the short term, but it is surely unsustainable in the long run (Arai, 2018).
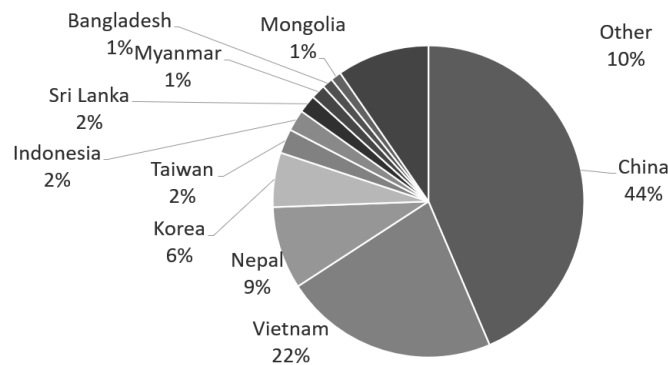

Figure 4. East Asianization of International Students (Source: JASSO 2021)

Factor 2. Fascinating Culture, Language, and Nature

Japan, as a country itself is very popular abroad. attractive to foreigners. There are almost four million learners of Japanese language worldwide, but only a quarter of them are from outside Asia. According to a survey data, people are learning Japanese because they are interested in manga, anime, J-Pop, etc. (54.0%), in history, literature, (49.7%), in future employment (42.3%), in study in Japan (34.0%), in culture (32.4%), in sightseeing (28.6%), in taking examinations (26.6%) (Japan Foundation, 2012). Among international students enrolled in Japan, it has positive images of easy life, anime, Sakura, beautiful streets, politeness, cute stuff, Akihabara (Yang & Yasuhisa, 2019). Japanese people became more active in perceiving multicultural issues, cross-cultural understanding. E.g., in Tokushima prefecture, residents are active in leaning diversified foreign languages and cultures, while providing community support to foreigners in Japanese language, culture exchange, disaster, employment, etc. (Tran, 2020; Tran & Matsuura, 2020).
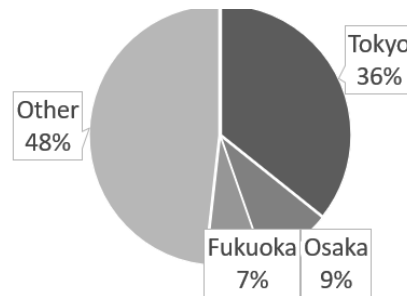
Figure 5. Urbanization of International Students (Source: JASSO 2021)

Figure 5 shows location of international students as a clear urban trend could be observed. Rural areas in Japan are rich of uniqueness of nature and tradition but face declining population. International students could be seen as resources to revitalize the locality. 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).

Factor 3. Affordable Cost, Part-Time Job, and Employment

A boom of Japan investment and Japan-owned companies has led to higher chance for employing student-returnees with higher salaries (Hirasawa, 2019). The open economic market in foreign countries brings better economic conditions for returnees. In short, from economic perspective, study abroad in Japan becomes more affordable while domestic education becomes more expensive may drive more students to choose study in Japan. About more than a decade ago, high living cost is the biggest challenge of privately funded students in Japan (Fujii & Masami, 2003). However, recently, a smaller number of international students perceived a high living cost, and economic situation of international students seems improved, as number of international students need counseling on financial problems is declining (Oka, 2018). It was reported that part-time job is a factor that attracts international students (Shizuka, 2015). Part-time job is the first experience of being worker a good opportunity for socialization to start thinking about the value and career of money, obligations, and responsibilities in society (Wakabayashi 2006). Students active in a 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 & Horiuchi, 2021). International students are 80% active, not only for income, but also for work experience & practicing Japanese, career development (Itoh & Hiruma, 2019) cultural understanding (Huang, 2018). Recently, problems related to part-time jobs decline and some privately students afford not work part-time. However, still some rely on part-time jobs for most living expenses (Oka, 2018).
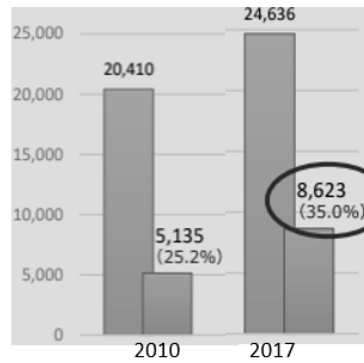
Figure 6. Employment Rate (Source: METI 2017 Foreign Student Career Survey)

Regarding job hunting, various measures are being implemented to ensure that international students can find employment in Japan. Since 2012, Immigration Bureau has implemented a points-based system to facilitate the immigration of highly skilled foreign professionals (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2012) which makes staying in Japan easier. Since 2016, the program for enhancing employment of international students has been approved by MEXT to be implemented in 12 universities, aiming at raising the employment rate in Japan from the current 30% to 50% (MEXT, 2017). Recently, the need for finding employment in Japan is very high among international students. In 2017, 63.6% of international students want to work in Japan, but only 30.1% found job (JASSO 2017). For job hunting, social support from local communities to international students has become an important factor for promoting job-seeking intention of international students. Studies have shown that who succeeded in employment had won the social support and they could do their job hunting similarly as Japanese students (Fujimoto et al., 2014). There is an increasing trend of job hunting in Japan as Figure 6 shows 35% of the respondents have found job in Japan in 2017 compared to 25.2% in 2010. However, most of the graduated students have found job in urban hubs such as Tokyo, Osaka, Kanagawa. Very few students successfully settled in rural areas. This fact shows is a clear disparity in destination of employment for international students.

Factor 4. Population Decline

Due to population decline, especially decline of the university-age population, since 1990s, Japanese higher education system has facing pressure to internationalize their operations (Yonezawa, 2019). Until now, even though the 18-year-old population has decreased, the college advancement rate has increased, and universities have been able to secure the number of students (Nakane, 2019). However, MEXT estimates that after 2018, the number enrollees will decline, regardless of increase in college advancement rate. In this situation, filling the gap of enrolment by recruiting more international students seems to become a challenge for Japan's HEIs soon.

Conclusion

Japan is a major host to the world's international student. This paper reviewed the pull factors that affect the inbound trends of international students. By examining related studies and literature, we demonstrated that international student inbound in Japan is strongly influenced by many pull factors. In this paper, we used evidence found in the literature to confirm the general pull factors, such as (i) world class education, (ii) fascinating culture, language, and nature; (iii) affordable cost, part-time job, and employment; (iv) population decline.

Regarding the world class education of Japan, literature has shown that this is a very strong pull factor that acts as a major national brand of Japan to attract international students into Japan. However, we also found some evidence of declining ranking and regional gap among top HEIs and non-top HEIs, as well as a trend of east asianization of Japan's science. Regarding Japanese culture, language, and nature as a pull factor, we found true evidence of the popularity of Japanese culture worldwide and among international students in Japan, and the sign of Japan to transform into multicultural society for regional revitalization, but again, here we found regional gap in the rural areas to make internationalization. Regarding affordable cost life in Japan, availability of part-time job, and employment possibilities, literature has shown that during the last decade, life in Japan has becoming more affordable, with plenty of part-time job and employment possibilities for international students. However, regional gap still exists, as most of the graduates have found job at big urban areas. Regarding population decline as a pull factor, the is no literature found to support this assumption so far, but this could become an indirect pull factor in the near future.

Our findings also include a literature review of policy-related pull factors and HEIs-related pull factors as specified by "300,000 International Students Plan", which could be seen as sub-national and institutional level pull factors and explain why students come to a specific institution or prefecture. For the length of the content, we will publish these findings in a separated publication.

In summary, in this study we could find the literature that supports the pull factors that are assumed to contribute to attracting international students to Japan. The trends and intensity of the pulling effect vary by time. There is a clear regional disparity between big urban areas and the other regions of Japan in terms of attractiveness to international students. These results show that there is an increasing trend for study in Japan pushed and pulled by multiple factors. These factors could influence the transition of mobility over time, including number of students, study destinations, career after graduation, which make impact to promote diversity and regional development of Japan.

Acknowledgement

References

Arai, S. (2018). East Asianization of Japan's Science: Why Is Japan's Scientific Achievement Declining? *National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies*, *18–13*. https://doi.org/10.24545/00001641

Fujii, K., & Masami, K. (2003). What are the difficulties of international students? From 2003 survey. *Bulletin of Yokohama National University International Student Center*, *11*, 113〜137. https://ynu.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=58 26&item_no=1&attribute_id=20&file_no=1

Fujimoto, M., Urasaka, J., & Moriyama, T. (2014). Social Support and Autonomous Action on the Job Hunting of International Students. *Hyoronshakai Kagaku : Social Science Review*, *110*, 69–104. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110009844332/en/

Fukada, E. (2019). Impact of the living environment of foreign students on learning Japanese: From a survey of the attitudes of international students studying at local universities. *Working Papers in Teaching Japanese*, *28*, 39–46.

Futagami, T. (2016). Comparison of the number of Chinese students majoring in engineering in. *Engineering Education in Global Period*, 60–61. http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications

Huang, M. (2018). Part-time job experience and career awareness of Chinese male privately funded international students. *Humanity Research*, *14*, 169–181.

Immigration Services Agency of Japan. (2012). *What is the point-based system for highly skilled professionals? Immigration Services Agency of Japan*. https://www.isa.go.jp/en/publications/materials/newimmiact_3_system_index.html

Itoh, H., & Hiruma, Y. (2019). Characteristics of privately financed international students : using a questionnaire of part-time employment. *Research Bulletin of Seijoh University*, *19*(3), 29–36.

Japan Foundation. (2012). *Approaching a Total of Four Million People―Who Learns Japanese Language in the World?* Japan Foundation Web Magazine. https://www.wochikochi.jp/english/topstory/2013/12/approaching-a-total-of-four-milli on-peoplewho-learns-japanese-language-in-the-world.php

JASSO. (n.d.). *Fascinating Study in Japan ｜ Why study in Japan? ｜ Essential guide for international students considering study in Japan*. Retrieved November 30, 2021, https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/en/why/attraction/

JASSO. (2020). *Result of an Annual survey of International Students in Japan 2020*. JASSO. https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/en/statistics/zaiseki/data/2020.html

Kuroda, K., Sugimura, M., Kitamura, Y., & Asada, S. (2018). Internationalization of Higher Education and Student Mobility in Japan and Asia. *2019 Global Education Monitoring Report*.

Kuwamura, A. (2009). The challenges of increasing capacity and diversity in japanese higher education through proactive Recruitment Strategies. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *13*(2), 189–202.

Lin, Y., & Horiuchi, T. (2021). Interrelations among Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction in Part-time Employment, A Study of International Students in Japan. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Okayama Uni*, *50*, 233–239.

Maruyama, H. (2011). International Student Policy of Japan. *Yamanashi Research Institute Newsletter*, *16*(22), 1–11.

Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). "Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *16*(2), 82–90. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403

MEXT. (2002). *13th Human Resources Committee of the Science and Technology Council of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology*. 1–16. https://www8.cao.go.jp/cstp/project/compe/haihu08/siryo3-1.pdf

MEXT. (2017). *Program for Enhancing Employment of International Students*. https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/highered/title02/detail02/sdetail02/sdetail02/1414915.htm

MEXT. (2020). *Gaikokujinryūgakusei zaiseki jōkyō chōsa ('Survey on the enrollment status of international students')*.

MEXT. (2021). *Top Global University Project*. https://tgu.mext.go.jp/en/

Nakane, M. (2019). *Universities that survive and disappear: The eve of "mass selection" of small and medium-sized private universities Where is it sinking! = Masayoshi Nakane | Weekly Economist Online*. https://weekly-economist.mainichi.jp/articles/20191203/se1/00m/020/049000c

OECD. (2020a). What is the profile of internationally mobile students? in Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators. *OECD Publishing*, 218–230. https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-19-en

OECD. (2020b). "Japan", in Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators. *OECD Publishing*, *Figure 1*, 1–6. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1787/9ed5d128-en

Oka, M. (2018). Empirical research on financial issues of international students. *Hiroshima University International Student Education*, *22*, 14–27.

Rakhshandehroo, M. (2018). A Qualitative Exploration of On-Campus Experiences of English-Speaking Graduate International Students at a Leading Japanese University. *Journal of International Students*, *8*(4), 1831–1847.

Rivers, D. J. (2010). Ideologies of internationalisation and the treatment of diversity within Japanese higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *32*(5), 441–454. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2010.511117

Sekiguchi, T. (2012). Part-time work experience of University students and their career development. *Japan Labor Review*, *9*(3), 5–29.

Shizuka, K. (2015). Recent trends in accepting foreign students and working part-time. *Current Status and Issues of Foreign Labor, Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training*, *622*(9), 98–115.

THE. (2021). *World University Rankings 2022*. Times Higher Education. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2022/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

Tran, H. N. (2020). Designing Online Language Courses: Lessons Learned from Teaching Vietnamese Language and Culture for Japanese Learners. *ACL2021 Official Conference Proceedings*. https://papers.iafor.org/submission59771/

Tran, H. N., & Jin, C.-H. (2021). Macro Factors Determining Transition of Vietnamese International Students Mobility. *The IAFOR 2021 European Conference on Education*.

Tran, H. N., & Matsuura, Y. (2020). The Image of Residents in a Rural Area of Japan about Vietnam : Future Needs for Intercultural Exchange. *Journal of the Center for Community Engagement and Lifelong Learning, Tokushima University*, *30*, 39–58. https://repo.lib.tokushima-u.ac.jp/ja/115549

Yang, W., & Yasuhisa, A. (2019). Analysis of Chinese Students' Motivation for Studying in Japan Using Free Association-Focusing on Heuristic Concepts-. *Human Geographical Society*, 44–45. https://doi.org/10.11518/HGEOG.2019.0_44

Yonezawa, A. (2019). Challenges of the Japanese higher education amidst population decline and globalization. *18*(1), 43–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2019.1690085

Contact email: tran@tokushima-u.ac.jp