

*The Vision and Preference of International Students
Enrolled in a Japanese Language School Post-Pandemic*

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Abstract

In 2022, Japan re-opened its border creating a new wave of students coming to Japan. In the summer of 2022, we investigated a group of 36 international students, coming from eight countries, who are currently enrolled in a Japanese language school in southern Japan. We conducted a rapid survey using a qualitative approach, asking the participants about the reason why they decided to come to Japan for studying Japanese, who were influencing the decision-making process, their priority goals while staying in Japan, their preferences for the place to live and study, as well as their intention for getting a job in Japan. The results showed that the students who came to Japan tend to have more long-term visions such as gaining a degree, specialty, job, or knowledge than short-term goals such as experiencing life in Japan. More students reported making the decision to come to Japan by themselves. Many of them reported a specific field or school that they want to enroll in after checking out from the Japanese language school. While a few of them wanted to enroll in higher education, more participants preferred to enter vocational school or just start job hunting. Most of the students showed hope to find a long-term job in Japan, while over a half seemed to prefer a quiet locality to live in. These results imply that the new wave of international students in Japan may show diversified needs and preferences, and it may need further research for effective recruiting strategies.

Keywords: International Students, Japanese Language School, Vision, Preference, Post-Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption for international students inbound to Japan. Travel restrictions had been taken by the Japanese government since January 2020, resulting in canceling or postponing acceptance, and mostly had impacted non-regular courses. Right after the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of international students in Japan decreased by 10.4% from 312,214 in the previous year (JASSO, 2020). 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. In April 2022, after two years of disruption, Japan re-opened its border again, at first for MEXT scholarship receivers only, then a few months later, for all categories of students, creating a wave of inbound to Japan.

There was evidence that the life plan of students was disrupted or changed for both students who were about to go to study abroad prior to the outbreak and students who have already enrolled abroad prior to the outbreak (Bista et al., 2021). The impact of COVID-19 reached overseas students who were planning to study in Japan. Immigration restrictions have prevented many international students from coming to Japan, forcing them to change, delay, or give up their plans to study abroad. Many schools guarantee online educational opportunities for international students who cannot enter the country. Many students unable to arrive in Japan at the scheduled time because of the Covid-19 pandemic had to take online classes overseas. Online classes have expanded the possibilities of learning across borders but studying abroad is not just about studying (Murata, 2022).

In our previous papers, we have reported the literature review about push-pull factors related to studying in Japan (Tran & Jin, 2021), support from universities provided to international students that could be seen as pull factors (Tran et al., 2022), and challenges in attracting international students to Japan (Tran & Jin, 2022a). In the current study, we investigate the motivation of study in Japan as well as the life course plan of the students in the period after the pandemic, this paper aims to show: (1) Why students decided to go to Japan to study; (2) Who influenced that decision; (3) Goals to be achieved in Japan; (4) Preferences of students regarding future choice of school and locality; (5) Job of preference in Japan; (6) Influence of COVID-19 over their course of study abroad.

Method

We designed a conceptual framework (Figure 1) to make clear the goals and purpose of this study. This study investigated three periods of the participants' life. For the period before going to Japan, they were required to recall when they had been residing in their home country, how was their intention to study abroad, and who had influenced their decision. During the present period, they were requested to clarify their goals in Japan, preferences for their future study, choice of school and locality, and intention to find a job in Japan. A cross-sectional survey was designed for collecting qualitative data using a structured qualitative data form, consisting of open-ended questions. The form was designed in a bilingual Japanese-English format. The participants were international students enrolled in a Japanese language program in Japan. We conducted data collection in July 2022 at a Japanese language center where the survey was announced to participants in a session. The survey was fully anonymous and no data to identify the person had been recorded. After obtaining informed consent, the participants were invited to fill out the forms. Participants could choose to exit the survey anytime during the process. We made a qualitative analysis of

the data obtained by using the KH Coder (*KH Coder*, n.d.). Word clouds were produced using a free online word cloud generator (*Word Cloud Generator*, n.d.).

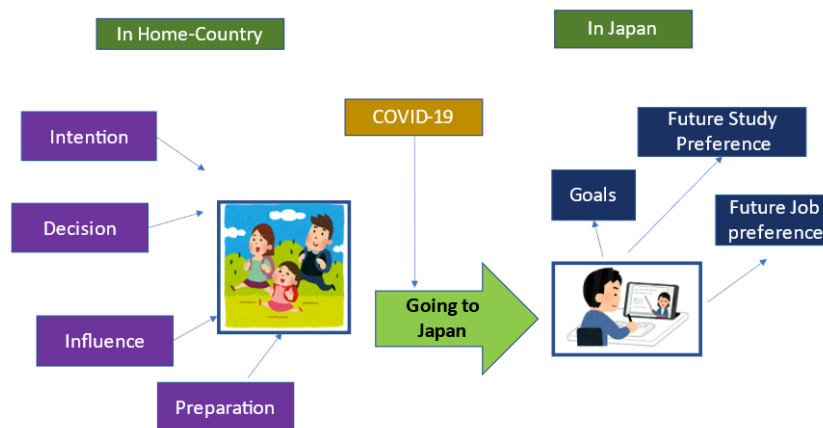


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the study

Results

Characteristics of respondents

Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, the number of international students enrolled in the concerned school was reported to be decreased by two third. At the time of the survey, there were 64% female students and 36% male students enrolled in the Japanese language program. Respondents reported coming from eight different countries, namely Vietnam, Nepal, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Taiwan. China, Indonesia, and Turkey. Students from Vietnam and Myanmar consisted of the highest number per country. China, Indonesia, and Turkey were represented only by one student per country. Most of the respondents were the age of 20-23, with only an exception of a student who reported to be over 30 years old. Most of the respondents reported being in Japan for less than six months, with a few exceptions of some students who reported to have been staying in Japan for over two years. For verifying questionnaire comprehension, respondents chose their corresponding level of language proficiency. According to the preliminary poll, more than a half of students reported to have a Japanese language N5 level by self-evaluation, and a third to have N3 level, but actual interaction with the respondents during the sessions had shown that the actual proficiency might have been lower than self-evaluated. Regarding English proficiency, about half of the respondents think reported to be beginners while another half placed themselves at an intermediate level.

High school		24
Associate		5
Vocational		0
Bachelor		7
Master		0
Other		0

Figure 2: Education before coming to Japan

the respondents. The highest frequent words seemed to be “family”, “mother”, “teacher”, “friend”, “parent”, “sister” ...



Figure 4A: Who influenced your decision

Analysis by KH Coder as shown in Figure 4B demonstrates that the most influential decision to go to Japan for study was made by my “myself”, seconded by the cluster “mother”, “father”, “parents”. Another big cluster was related to “teacher” and “friend”.

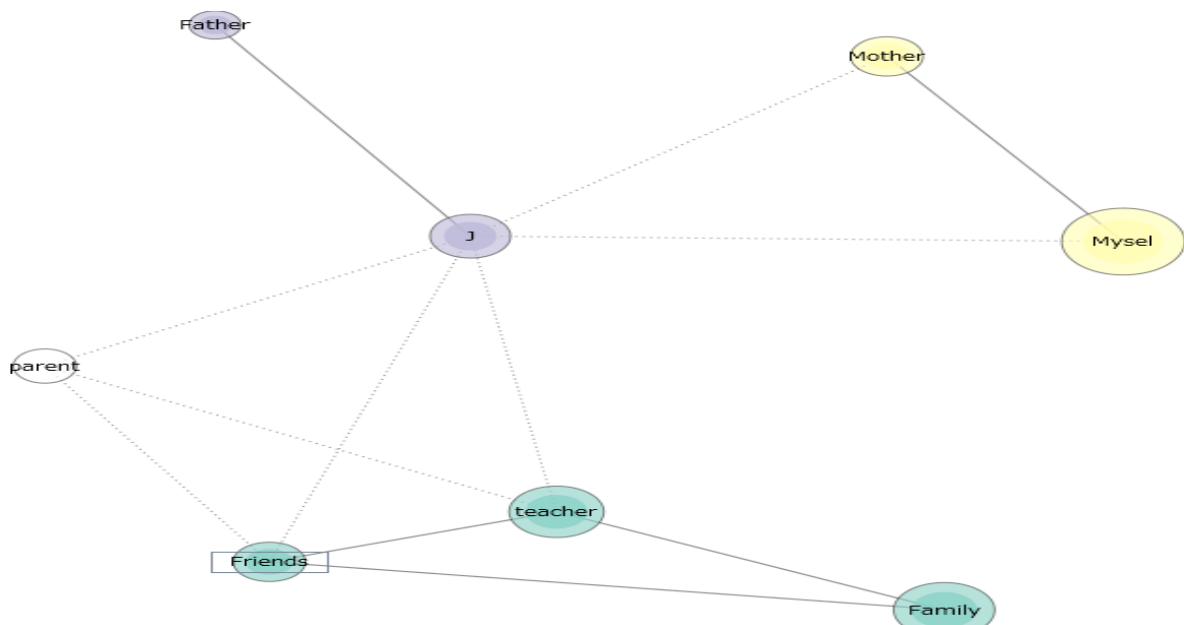


Figure 4B: Who influenced your decision (analyzed by KH Coder)

Your goals in Japan

The third open-ended question extended to the respondents was “Your goals in Japan”. Figure 5A shows the word cloud displaying the answers of the respondents. The highest frequent words seemed to be “job”, “study”, “language”, “degree”, “lifestyle”, “knowledge”, “experience” ...

Looking at the interrelationship between these words by KH Coder as shown in the diagram (Figure 7B), it could be inferred that the preference for locality in Japan could be a specific big urbanity the like Osaka or Fukuoka, or a place to be quiet, beautiful, convenient.

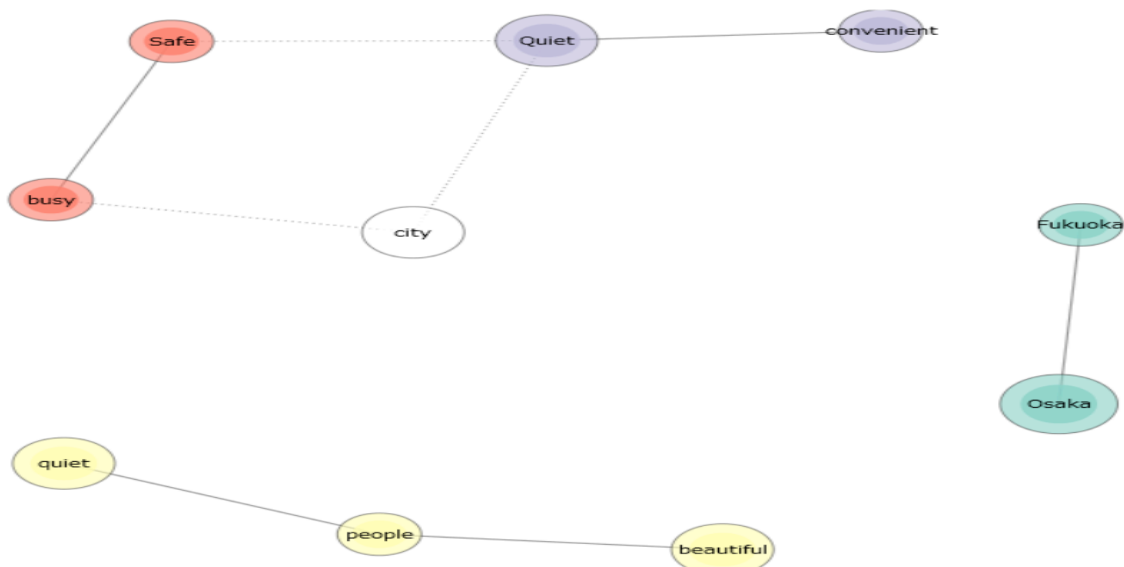


Figure 7B: Your locality of preference (analyzed by KH Coder)

Your job of preference

The sixth open-ended question extended to the respondents was “Your job of preference (in Japan)”. Figure 8A shows the word cloud displaying the answers of the respondents. There are three clear trends within the answers. The first trend is to prefer health care sector such as “nurse”, “occupational therapist”. The second trend is related to tourism business such as “hotel”, “restaurant”, “economic”, “translator”. The third trend sticks on social worker jobs such as “teacher”, “child”, “environment”.



Figure 8A: Your job of preference

Looking at the interrelationship between these words by KH Coder as shown in the diagram (Figure 8B), it could be inferred that the preference for job in Japan could be a health care and pharmacy cluster, business and management cluster, tourism cluster, education cluster, agriculture cluster, fashion, and design cluster. The desired job must be highly paid, enjoyable, with benefit, non-toxic, as shown in the diagram.

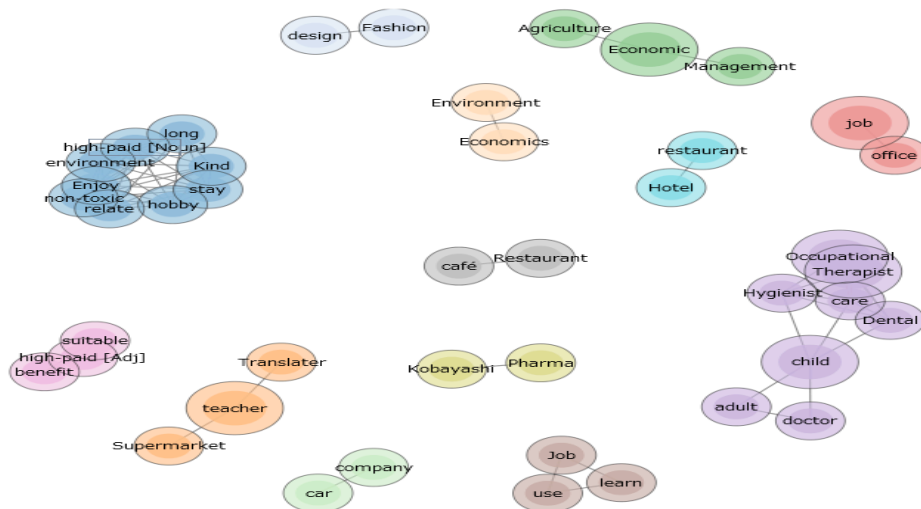


Figure 8B: Your job of preference (analyzed by KH Coder)

Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the study abroad plan

Some of the respondents stated the difficulty when they had to wait for a year or more before they could depart for Japan. The other said they had to stay at the same school for longer than planned because their initial plan has been changed. But the respondents are still in better position than some of their mates who had to give up the study abroad plan while waiting the pandemic to end. Difficulty in finding a part-time job in Japan was also reported. Moreover, apparently, the pandemic has impacted mental status of international students related to perceived uncertainty about the future.

Discussion

In the present study, we intended to use quantitative method to explore the factors related to the whole study in Japan process of the respondents. After completing this phase, we plan to use the results for designing the next step of our project, to conduct a quantitative study to further clarify the obstacles.

Regarding the question why the respondents have chosen Japan as their study abroad destination, our results has shown some consistency with various studies in the past. We found that the respondents were motivated by the characteristics and uniqueness of Japan such as culture, language, hardworking attitude, advanced country, best environment for education, a peaceful country etc. They were also motivated by the prospects of future living in Japan, having job, entering university, realizing their dream. Comparing to the push-pull factors concepts of study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), the present study has shown some of the reason to choose Japan was push such as want to study, want a job, want to experience. Related to push factors found here, we could somehow see a paradigm shift from “getting education abroad and returning home” (Gareth, 2005) to a more immigration-intention push factors within this group of respondents. Regarding the pull factors, generally, the current study has found the pull factors coincided with the general pull factors of Japan as mentioned in previous studies (Tran & Jin, 2022b). The respondents have stated the pull reasons such as unique culture, best education, high-tech, safety.

To the question “Who influenced your decision to go to study in Japan”, our findings demonstrate similar patterns of responses to previous studies. As the respondents are mostly

come from Asian countries where individuals are strongly affected by their families, it's not surprise that the respondents revealed that their family, mother, parents, father, sister are highly influencers, seconded by people in their close circle such as teacher or friend.

It was argued that international students' motivation to study abroad could be described by the level of their self-determined motivation to study abroad and by the type of goals they set for themselves while in a foreign country (Chirkov et al., 2007). In the current study, we also demonstrate that majority was mentioned "myself" as the person who make decision to go to Japan, well ahead of family or close circle. On the other hand, studies have shown that most of the students come from countries in Asia such as Nepal, Vietnam or China usually use a professional agent for studying abroad (Thieme, 2017), however, in the current study, it is surprised that no one mentioned that their decision were influenced by a study abroad agent.

Regarding the question about "Your goals in Japan", its seems that the respondents have revealed their goals in a very realistic long-term patterns either for study or for live plan, such as getting a degree, reaching Japanese language N1 level, going to vocational school, getting a job in Japan, becoming a permanent resident, etc. However, there are also goals related to experience such as to travel, to experience Japanese lifestyle, or to enjoy the Japanese culture, etc. This is consistent with the fact that basically, students enrolled in Japanese language schools are students who seek a long-term degree program and eventually employment in Japan.

Regarding the university of choice in Japan, we revealed that many of the respondents did not seem to have a plan to enter university, but rather choose to enter a vocational school where they can learn technical professional skills and can find a job in Japan in the fields related to tourism, health care or IT. The results show the preference of schools are similar to those identified by many previous studies. It was clear that they prefer national or public university, where the specialties such as technology, economics, business, nursing are taught. More respondents preferred big city such as Osaka, which is also consistent with many other reports. Some previous studies have also demonstrated the important factors such as "range of programs available" (Bodycott, 2009), but have not rate the reputation of institution as important, as the current study has.

About the locality of preference in Japan of the respondents, we have clearly found two trends of preference, as some prefer a big urban site while the others prefer a sub-urban site. The problems that international students face in universities have been well documented in the literature, either worldwide (Bodycott, 2009) or in Japan (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002; Simic-Yamashita & Tanaka, 2010; Tanaka et al., 1994). Within the existing literature, however, few studies address non-urban contexts and prioritize the perspectives of international students in rural universities (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007). In the latter literature, however, the students who decided going to non-urban area were described as no better choice was offered to them, rather than they initiatively preferred the rural areas. Contrary to that, our findings demonstrated a clear preference to a quiet and non-urban place among a half of the group.

About the type of job preferred, presumably in Japan, the respondents seem to have very clear plan from the beginning, and they job of choice were very clearly stated, either health care sector, tourism business or other social jobs. There conditions come as the job must be highly paid, enjoyable, with benefit, non-toxic. Our findings in this study support the existing evidence. A study in Europe has shown that how to find a job upon graduation is apparently a

big concern for students, and opportunities for work upon graduation and earning money when studying matter more for non-European students (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). In Japan, there is increasing need of hunting a job in Japan among international students and efforts for supporting this process are already in place (Uosaki et al., 2018).

As it is the first stage of our research plan, the current report could not be seen independently as conclusive and completed, since its results will be used to design broader research. The limited number of participants and number of their country of origin also should be interpreted with consideration. Due to limited time allocated to data collection, this study does not intend to collect quantitative-oriented variables such as field of study, status of scholarship, age, part-time job, income. In the next stage, more variables, as well as more sophisticated design such as cohort study, longitudinal study, intervention study may be considered. Some areas of focus could also be considered, such as mental health, exposure to over-information, influence of part-time job... Comparative data between countries and institutions could also be collected.

Conclusion

In this paper, the authors use the qualitative research approach to investigate the factors influencing decisions of international students to go to Japan, their goals and preferences in Japan as well as future prospect in Japan. Most of the respondents, who are studying Japanese language in Japan, are arrived in Japan in spring 2022, after Japan re-opened its border for international students. We explored the reason why they decided to come to Japan, who were influencing the decision-making process, their priority goals while staying in Japan, their preferences for the place to live and study, as well as their intention for getting a job in Japan. Our findings have shown that the students who came to Japan tend to have more long-term visions such as gaining a degree, specialty, job, or knowledge than short-term goals such as experiencing life in Japan. More students reported making the decision to come to Japan by themselves. Many of them reported a specific field or school that they want to enroll in after checking out from the Japanese language school. While a few of them wanted to enroll in higher education, more participants preferred to enter vocational school or just start job hunting. Most of the students showed hope to find a long-term job in Japan, while over a half seemed to prefer a quiet locality to live in. These results imply that the new wave of international students in Japan after COVID-19 may have diversified needs and preferences. These findings also demonstrated the need for further investigation on factors influencing international students' plan for drawing out new effective recruiting and supporting strategies.

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