

Pandemic disruption and future challenges in Japanese higher education

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Abstract

Internationalizing Japanese higher education is essential for expanding cross-cultural understanding and addressing social and economic issues (Kingston, 2019). With fewer domestic students due to a declining birth rate, universities struggle to fill enrolment capacity (Statistics Bureau Japan, 2022). At the same time, universities are not graduating enough students for the labour force. To address this demographic time bomb, the recruitment and retention of international students are crucial. As stated in the '3000,000 International Student (IS) Plan', it is necessary to "create an appropriate environment for accepting international students" and "promote the acceptance of international students' post-graduation, especially in seeking employment opportunities" (MEXT, 2008). In 2020, just as Japan met its goal to attract 300,000 international students, the pandemic turned internationalization on its head. Japan quickly closed its borders, leaving many international students stuck inside or outside Japan. The enrolment of non-degree-seeking students dropped by 49.5% (Nakasato & Kashima, 2021), significantly affecting revenues in local economies. This study examines the widespread disruption to internationalization over the two-year entry ban (March 2020 - April 2022) to understand stakeholders' experiences. The study aims to understand student perceptions towards internationalization efforts in Japan, utilizing interviews with international students (both degree and non-degree-seeking students). It also examines internationalization management, looking at MEXT policies in response to the pandemic and reports on focus groups with those tasked with managing and communicating policies at a university level. With internationalization student numbers slow to rebound, the study aims to understand future challenges regarding higher education internationalization in Japan.

Keywords: internationalization policy, international student mobility, foreign workers, agile management, experiences and perceptions