

LOSING STEAM: THE DEMISE OF THE “JAPANESE DREAM” AMONG PROSPECTIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Much like immigration, reasons to study abroad often relate to push and/or pull factors. Although attractive programs and courses can be major pulls for some prospective international students, financial matters such as tuition, living costs, and pathways to employment also have a significant influence. Since 2010 when Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiated projects and activities to promote the internationalization of universities, the number of inbound international students in Japan was steadily increasing, most of which were coming from East and Southeast Asia. This trend continued up until around 2018, and, understandably, rapidly declined in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and implementation of rigid border restrictions. While the pandemic undoubtedly played a major part in this downtrend, one cannot overlook the fact that enrollments and interest in studying in Japan was already losing steam. With its university rankings increasingly losing out to competitive universities in China and Singapore and its relatively low entry-level salaries amid a long-term recession, which has further been exacerbated by the weakened yen, the “Japanese dream” is arguably past its prime. While taking into account the contextual factors which influenced this trend, my study involved a critical discourse analysis of MEXT’s ambitious plan to somehow reverse this trend by bolstering further internationalization, attracting highly-skilled foreign talent and essentially saving a sinking ship. The findings from this study may give institutions in the education and employment sectors an opportunity to reassess their current support systems and programs for lucrative foreign talent.*

Keywords: *internationalization; education policies; discourse analysis; higher education*

1. Introduction

Although impacted by the pandemic in early 2020, the flow of international students, for the most part, has been growing exponentially. According to UNESCO's findings, student mobility numbers doubled from 2000 to 2015, and this is also expected to bifold by 2025 (Guruz, 2011). In a European context, this has been easily enabled by the Erasmus+ programme. However, for non-EU based tertiary-level students, study abroad opportunities are often provided through one's university's exchange partnership agreements, whereby credits from classes taken abroad can be smoothly transferred to one's total credits. As a convenient and comfortable option, this is an attractive option for students wishing to venture abroad for a semester or two. For others with different motivations or aspirations, the so-called "degree-seeking" students, reasons to study at a specific university or in a specific country often relate to push and/or pull factors. Although specific degrees or courses with career paths can be major pulls for some international students, financial matters such as tuition, living costs, and pathways to employment also have a significant influence. Aware of its ageing and dwindling population (and therefore a lack of human resources), since at least the late 1990s, Japan started heavily investing in attracting international students and for a while, it worked. Since 2010 when Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (henceforth abbreviated to 'MEXT') initiated projects to promote the internationalization of universities, the number of inbound students in Japan was steadily increasing, most of which were coming from East and Southeast Asia. This continued until around 2018, and then rapidly declined due to the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent border restrictions. Naturally, the pandemic played a significant role in this downtrend, but enrollments and interest in studying in Japan were already losing steam. With its university rankings increasingly losing out to competitive universities in neighboring countries like China and Singapore, and its relatively low entry-level salaries amid a long-term recession, (which has further been exacerbated by the weakened yen), the "Japanese dream" for most of these East/Southeast Asian students is arguably past its prime. While taking into account the contextual factors which influenced this trend, my study looks at the rhetoric in MEXT's ambitious plan to somehow reverse this trend by heavily investing into internationalization at higher education institutions, and thereby attract highly-skilled foreign talent to save a sinking ship. The findings and discussions from this paper may give institutions in the education and employment sectors an opportunity to reassess their current support systems and programmes for highly lucrative foreign talent.

2. Context and media discourse

Thanks to the weakened yen and booming tourism industry, tourism studies and statistics paint a rather positive picture of international visitors to Japan. Major news outlet Reuters even reported that in spite of the record heat wave in mid-July 2023, “travelers are pouring in, taking advantage of a slide in the currency that has made holidays the cheapest in decades” (Kajimoto & Swift, 2023). While travelers are pouring in and, in turn, pumping money into the economy, they are impermanent. Naturally, this is unsustainable as a major source of revenue for the country. People need to come, stay, spend, and contribute—and this is where international students step in and serve an important role. As previously noted, the number of international students was steadily increasing until 2018, but then the influx started to stall. Understandably, a range of factors have influenced the trend, but the recent lack of economic growth, and endless media reports on Japan’s dismal work conditions and culture of excessive overtime work cannot be overlooked. International and even domestic media reports seem to repeat the same rhetoric about the poor conditions for foreign workers and the brain drain of talent in Japan. Take, for example, a sample of headlines and excerpts from the following reports about Japan’s higher education and employment issues since 2018 (Table 1 below).

Media Outlet/Source	Headline	Excerpt/Lead
Asahi Shimbun (Japan) (May 10, 2023)	Foreign students trying to work in Japan met with high hurdles	“ ‘Foreign students alone are usually blamed for not being able to find a job, in some way,’ she said. ‘That extinguishes their enthusiasm’. Foreign students are valuable resources in Japan as it is going through a labor shortage, observers said”
Japan Times (Japan) (Jun.22, 2022)	Will a ¥10 trillion fund be the savior of Japan’s universities?	“ ‘Global performance will require much greater global engagement, not just bringing in foreign students, but acting like an international place in the middle of Japan,’ he said. ‘There are great foreign students in Japanese universities, but they’re kind of on the side’ ”
Nikkei Asia (Japan) (Dec.22, 2020)	Japan losing global talent race, Suga economic adviser warns	“Japan’s inability to attract foreign employees despite years of globalization efforts damages the country’s financial services sector and other fields crucial to future growth”
Nikkei Asia (Japan) (Jan.3, 2022)	Japan misses foreign talent as companies seek strong linguists	“Many Japanese companies are missing out on opportunities to employ highly qualified foreign nationals with valuable skills because of their insistence that recruits have high Japanese skills”
Nikkei Asia (Japan)	Japan weighs longer stays for	“Move aims to boost competitiveness by easing job

(Jan.22, 2022)	world's elite college graduates	hunting for skilled foreigners”
Nikkei Asia (Japan) (Jun.22, 2022)	Now admitting: Japan aims to regain 300,000 foreign students	“The number of international students in Japan slid from more than 310,000 in fiscal 2019 to 242,000 in fiscal 2021. The drop was even deeper for Japanese students going overseas, from about 107,000 in fiscal 2019 to 1,400 in fiscal 2020”
Nikkei Asia (Japan) (Nov.5, 2022)	Without internationalization, Japanese higher education is sinking	Keeness for English “has helped China’s institutions of higher education continue to rise in global rankings while Japan’s slide”
Nippon.com (Japan) (Aug.16, 2022)	Restarting International Study in Japan in the Post-COVID Era	“The falling number of international students and the declining proportion of international students finding work in Japan after graduation is likely to have a negative impact in many ways, hampering companies’ ability to expand overseas and develop products for overseas markets, and making it harder for the country to attract inbound tourists and secure the necessary human resources in fields like nursing care”
Kyodo News (Japan) (Dec.31, 2022)	Japan ranks 41st in attracting talent in 2022: Swiss Survey	“Japan ranked 41st out of 63 economies in 2022 in attracting and retaining foreign talent, down two spots from a year earlier and the fourth straight year in decline”
The Mainichi (Japan) (May.7, 2019)	‘Life has become so hard’: Nepali student’s suicide shows problems of Japanese dream	“In a survey Gyawali carried out in 2018 on 353 foreign students, 198 (56%) said they suffer from stress caused by financial concerns, while some 115 (33%) of respondents feel anxiety from having no one to help them here”
Asia Times (International) (Dec.31, 2021)	Japan pays a high price as it goes down market	“Japan is becoming a “cheap” country in terms of, not just its prices, but also its human resources. It has abysmally low starting salaries for graduates, and – exacerbating existing labor shortages – is facing a brain drain [...] Japan is on course to becoming a poor nation, dependent on tourism, where the young and brightest minds leave the country for better jobs with better pay”
Deutsche Welle (International) (Aug.12, 2022)	Japanese universities losing battle with foreign rivals	“A shrinking population, fewer foreign students, falling government support and greater overseas opportunities pose serious challenges for tertiary education in Japan”
The Washington Post (International) (Nov.1, 2022)	Japan asks if it’s better to flip burgers than work at a megabank	“The situation has some fretting about the risk of a brain drain, as the young go in search of opportunities abroad. Conversely, the health-care and construction workers that Japan has been trying to coax from overseas may find the country a less attractive destination when they calculate how much their wages are worth back home”

Table 1. Media reports concerning education and employment

Without performing a full discourse analysis, it is clear that reports have not been favorable and perhaps that the future looks bleak for Japan's efforts to attain and retain foreign students and talented human resources. A simple sentiment analysis of the Table 1's corpus using the discourse analysis and text mining tool *User Local* also reinforced that the texts were overwhelmingly negative in tone and leaned towards expressions of anger (see Figure 1).

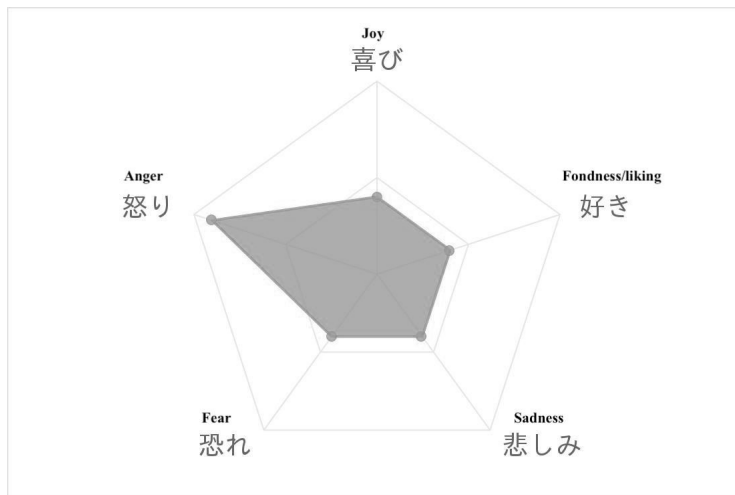


Figure 1. *Sentiment analysis of media reports*

It must be noted, however, that it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations from such a small sample size. Furthermore, the tendency of news outlets to emphasize and capitalize on the mantra “bad news is good news” must also be taken into account. In any case, the major issues at hand based on the sample are: 1) Japan's decline in global competitiveness, 2) Japan's problems with attracting international students, and 3) Japan's problem with securing and retaining human resources.

Part of the problem is that Japan is facing a population decline due to the ageing population and low birth rate. This has naturally resulted in a strained welfare system, lack of human resources, and therefore lack of global competitiveness in business. After the bubble economy went bust in the late 1990s, Japan struggled to attract foreign talent, so it revised its system for accepting international students in the early 2000s. In 2008 MEXT introduced the Global 30 which aimed to increase the number of international students in Japan to 300,000, and to help promote the overall internationalization of higher education (MEXT, 2022c). Behind this was the intention to secure foreign talent, make Japan more competitive, to handle the ageing population

problem, to promote mutual understanding, and foster Japanese students' global competence. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the number of international students in Japan was steadily increasing in the early 2000s, so in that sense, Japan's mission was successful to an extent. However, the rate of employment for international students has proven difficult. The domestic employment rate for international students was merely 36.9% in 2019, which is still below the government's target of 60% by 2033 (MHLW, 2021). In addition, despite COVID-19's negative impact on job seekers across the board, Disco Corporation's employment rate survey conducted with over 2800 graduating students from 2019 to 2021 revealed that Japanese students are more than twice as likely to be employed than international students (Figure 2).

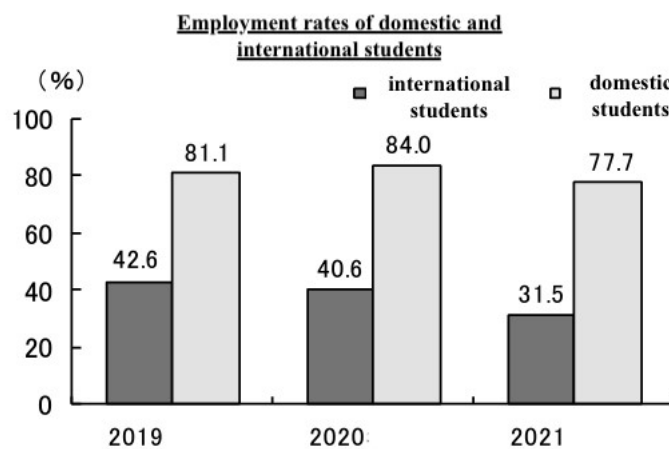


Figure 2. Employment rate comparison

Thus, based on media reports and rhetoric as well as employment statistics, MEXT is currently facing the problem of: 1) trying to attract and retain foreign talent or somehow encouraging its so-called “inward looking” students to study abroad, 2) internationalizing its universities amidst dwindling global rankings, and 3) offering more courses or degrees taught in English (which is not guaranteed to attract domestic students). The following section will thus examine and analyze MEXT's recent strategic proposal (released in late 2022) to deal with these matters.

3. Methods

Prior to revealing the findings, a brief outline of the research methods is necessary. Basically, this study involved a critical discourse analysis

of MEXT's strategic proposal taken from its study group on "The Strategic Promotion of International Student Exchange," which was released and uploaded on the Ministry of Education's official website with several other documents in late 2022. The specific data set subject to analysis was Reference File 3 ("The Current Status of International Exchange in Higher Education"). The 66-page document essentially includes data and findings regarding the current inbound/outbound study abroad trends, statistics, and issues (MEXT, 2022c). In addition, and more pertinent, the document further reveals Japan's Ministry of Education's strategies to attract more international students and secure talented and high-skilled human resources. My approach involved a critical discourse analysis based on Norman Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional framework. Fairclough's approach to discourse analysis are as follows:

to make visible through analysis, and to criticize, connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations (ideologies, power relations) which are generally not obvious to people who produce and interpret those texts, and whose effectiveness depends upon this opacity. (1995, p. 97)

Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for analysis involves a linguistic description of the language text, an interpretation of the relationship between (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and an explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and social processes (1995, p.97). In this sense, I take into account the fact that the document was created by Japan's current Ministry of Education run by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in a context of global recession and population decline. This also means that the contents might be of especial concern to both public and private universities hoping to attract international students, as well as businesses in fields with staff shortages or future economic prospects (such as IT, medicine, and engineering). By taking into account the text's source and the intended audience, as well as the context of the transmission of the information, it is possible to conjecture the ideological intentions of the text and take a critical stance.

4. Analysis and discussions

General issues to consider

From page nine of the document, MEXT outlines its current concerns and approaches to handle the points of concern. These concerns have been summarised and analysed in the following points:

- “In order to realise the LDP’s “new capitalism” concept, the government needs to invest in human resources, high-skilled workers, and foster the growth of globally competent citizens who embrace diversity” → discussion: The Liberal Democratic Party’s intention is to simply stimulate economic growth by employing highly-skilled individuals with global competence.
- “There is a need to recover the loss of foreign workers/talent that Japan failed to acquire or attract due to COVID-19” → discussion: instead of looking at other factors which may have driven potential workers to other nearby countries like Singapore or Australia, the Ministry of Education is using COVID-19 as a scapegoat for pre-existing problems with attracting and retaining students and workers.
- “The government needs to promote more inbound and outbound study abroad programmes, attract diverse and innovative human resources, and create a more sustainable society → discussion: the statement is more or less a desperate call for outstanding human resources in the context of a rapidly ageing population and declining birth rate.

Strategies to attract exceptional international students — Scholarships

To follow, MEXT outlines its scholarship system (p.15) to entice more international students to study in Japan. The bottom left side of the table reveals that, to attract more foreign talent, MEXT has bolstered its scholarship funding system offering between 117,000¥ per month to 145,000¥ per month for undergrad to graduate level students → discussion: unless these students engage in part-time work or have an alternative and stable source of income, this is barely a livable amount. As the University of Tokyo clearly states on its Financial Aid page, the “cost of living in Tokyo is the highest in Japan, a country already known for its high cost of living. The average monthly expense (tuition fees not included) [...] is JPY 137,061 for a single student” (University of Tokyo, 2023).

In addition, in the upper left part of the table where the “aims” of the scholarships are listed, it outlines the following main objectives: “to attract excellent or exceptional foreign talent to Japanese universities, to strengthen Japan’s international relations, and to improve Japan’s

global research-related rankings and performance → discussion and underlying issue: Japan is struggling to compete in terms of quality of research output compared to the US and China, and it is in a haste to change that by giving preference to excellent researchers instead of regular students. However, with universities abroad offering far more generous scholarships, it is going to be a challenge.

Furthermore, the table on page 17 indicates that more funds and scholarships are allocated to students in higher education rather than students enrolled in vocational schools, technical colleges, or Japanese language schools. To be precise, there were 4581 scholarships available for university students and only 730 scholarships for students at vocational schools, technical colleges, or Japanese language schools → discussion: the rhetoric of acquiring mainly excellent or exceptional students is repeated here and there is also emphasis on mainly helping students who might have financial difficulties. The problem with this, however, is that there are exceptional researchers out there who Japan is missing out on because they place less emphasis on supporting students who might be a bit better off.

Strategies to attract exceptional international students – Bolstering employment support

Taking into consideration the aforementioned issue of employment after graduation for international students, on page 18, MEXT reveals its plans to implement employment support programmes for graduates at over 50 higher education institutions by 2026, and additionally aims to reach a 50% graduate employment rate by 2025. The same page also includes a bar chart of international students' employment rates (Figure 3, left) and a diagram which suggests that a “high quality education programme” comprises internships, Japanese language education, and career guidance → discussion: As previously stated, that the number of students who secured jobs started declining in 2018, thus reducing it to a COVID-19 issue is far too simplistic and disregards other diverse factors contributing to the problem (such as cultural and language barriers or systemic issues). While reasonable to an extent, the diagram that assumes that internships, Japanese language education, and career guidance equate to a high-quality education programme is also simplistic. What is crucial to investigate is why international students are not being hired, what is discouraging students from getting a job in Japan, and the problems with Japanese companies' business styles and work ethics.



Figure 3. Employment rates of international students and factors contributing to a high-quality education programme

Strategies to attract exceptional international students – Online courses

Another one of ministry's plans in the document is the "Japan Virtual Campus" concept (p.22). The aim is to simply boost the number of online courses for inbound and outbound students in a post-pandemic context. One of the goals is to promote the strengths and appealing points of Japanese universities. Other goals include increasing the amount of hybrid classes and on-demand classes, and increasing classes taught in English and Japanese classes which also promote "Cool Japan" ideology → discussion: While online courses are cost-efficient, practical for institutions and students with financial or mobility difficulties, and some students might even feel more motivated (Almaleki, 2021), the lack of interaction can have a detrimental effect on other learners (Esra & Sevilen, 2021). Essentially, the bottom line is that online learning systems are cost efficient for education institutions in Japan, and content that promotes "Cool Japan" ideology and the supposed strengths of Japanese universities is arguably soft power marketing masked as education.

Strategies to attract exceptional international students – Increasing partnerships

The ministry's following proposition is to increase and strengthen Japan's programmes and partnerships with universities overseas with a 1-billion-yen investment (marked in the darker shaded areas in Figure 4). However, there is a distinct emphasis on partnerships with American universities → discussion: aside from providing more English language education programmes for outbound students, perhaps a reason partnering up with more American universities is related to the fact that they have traditionally dominated the global university rankings. Thus, attracting elite or outstanding achievers or researchers from these universities is obviously an ideal situation for Japanese universities and invested businesses.



Figure 4. Countries to increase partnerships with

Strategies to attract exceptional international students – Focusing on skills shortage fields

According to the international student demographics in Japan based on students’ majors (p.36), while Germany, Russia and the US attract engineering students, Japan is somehow failing to.

Rather, most of the international students in Japan are enrolled in humanities or business and management courses. There are also few students in math and computer science courses. These are ideally the students Japan is trying to attract and benefit from to remain globally competitive (rather than students in the humanities). The following is MEXT’s list of the kind of students Japan expects to benefit from. As evidenced in Figure 5 (p.61 of the document), engineering, corporate law, medicine, and agriculture are the areas of expertise Japan desires, yet, as noted, most students tend to enroll in humanities courses → discussion: The aforementioned fields of employment which are in demand are by no means specific to Japan. The shortage of medical staff in a number of countries was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the World Health Organization also estimates that there will nevertheless be a shortfall of 10 million healthcare workers by 2030 (WHO, 2023). Aware of its ageing population, Japan is in desperate need of aged-care workers as well as general practitioners. In addition, food security is becoming a serious issue due to Japan’s low its self-sufficiency rate of only 38%, which has been described as “the lowest among other major countries” (Lewis & Inagaki, 2022). Considering this context and the emphasis on “contributing to the stability of life in Japan,” one could argue that the underlying motivation is for Japan to protect its own people by luring foreign professionals. In addition, given that IT professionals and engineers are

remunerated far better overseas, Japan is also seeing its own citizens migrate elsewhere for better opportunities and a comfortable work-life balance (Maeda, 2023). Trying to retain workers in these fields and persuade talented international students in these fields to study and work in Japan (rather than in countries offering generous salary packages and conditions) is going to be a challenge. Essentially, the expectations of students majoring in these fields are to primarily prevent the country (Japan) from going hungry, sick (resulting in staff shortages), and becoming less competitive (due to a lack of innovation and overseas business expansion). In short, the rhetoric is “What can we get from them?” rather than “What can we offer?” and this is arguably neither a sustainable nor ideal approach.

	Field	Purpose/Contribution
(1) 外国人留学生受け入れ政策の重点分野 十分に期待できる重点分野		
工学	電気、資源、エネルギー、建築等の開発分野から防災、環境保全まで幅広い基礎的な分野。多岐にわたり諸州産出の発展に寄与。	Students in engineering can contribute in a number of ways, including disaster prevention and environmental conservation activities through developments in the production of electricity, resources, and energy. In addition, they can build partnerships and connections overseas in a number of fields.
社会科学 (法制度)	民法、商法等社会基盤を形成する実務分野を中心に、諸外国の法整備等に寄与することにより、現地のみならず我が国の企業の現地進出等に利益。	With a focus on practical fields such as civil law and commercial law, by contributing to the development of laws in other countries, students from these fields will be beneficial not only for local companies, but also for Japanese companies hoping to expand overseas.
医療	医療人材の育成による諸外国の医療水準の向上への貢献、ODA等により我が国に立した病院等医療施設の継続的な運営に寄与。	Contribute to the improvement of medical standards in other countries through the development of medical professionals; contribute to the continuous operation of hospitals and other medical facilities established by Japan through ODA and other means.
農学	食料の増産、バイオマスの利用によるエネルギーの開発等に貢献することにより、現地生活の安定、我が国の食料安全保障に寄与。	Contribute to the stability of life in Japan and its food security by increasing domestic food production and energy resources through the use of biomass.

Figure 5. Students from fields Japan expects to benefit from

Strategies to attract exceptional international students – Scholarships for students in especially demanded fields

On page 62 of the document, the ministry further outlines how it will provide potential scholarships and programmes for international students in the four major fields mentioned above.

The following is a summary of the intentions and plans:

Prioritised fields of study and plans

- Bolster MEXT’s Scholarship Programme for International Students (University admission based on the recommendation system)

- By using the “Special Programme for Preferential Placement of MEXT Scholarship Students” (for graduate school), students can apply for (and be accepted in) programmes in the fields of engineering, social sciences, medicine, and agricultural science

→ Discussion: Evidently, MEXT is focusing on graduate students and attracting more talented researchers or human resources rather than the average undergraduate student in humanities or Japanese language courses. Because Japan is offering greater or more generous opportunities for exceptional graduate-level students, ordinary undergraduate students are being overlooked as valuable human resources. The problem with this is that these students will seek opportunities elsewhere, especially countries that offer higher or competitive wages. Also, it is highly likely that exceptionally talented graduate students would first search for medicine, law or engineering postgraduate degrees in renowned, prestigious, or top-ranked universities in Europe or North America which offer courses in English. The difficult job application process, emphasis on strong work ethics and company loyalty, poor work-life balance, and stagnant and low salaries make seeking employment in Japan undesirable. Talented human resources will go where they are treated better and paid better and that is the harsh reality Japan now faces.

Strategies to attract exceptional international students – Region-specific recruitment

While the above-mentioned major fields are priorities for MEXT, what students from specific regions can offer Japan are also emphasized in page 61 of the proposal. Figure 6 outlines MEXT’s list of “Prioritized Regions/Countries” and how students from said regions can contribute to Japan’s prosperity. Basic translations of the content in Figure 6 and discussions can be found below.

(2) 我が国の発展に特に寄与すると考えられる重点地域及び今後の対応方針	
重点地域	対応方針
東南アジア (ASEAN)	・ASEANは我が国との人的交流が最も活発な地域であるとともに、将来的にも、日系企業の進出も盛んになる地域であることから、各国の状況を考慮しつつ、教育の質を確保する仕組みを構築し、量的な拡大を図る。
アフリカ	・アフリカは、サブサハラを中心に、今後大きな成長が期待できる一方、治安や病気の不安が大きい地域である。今後、アフリカからの留学生を増やすに当たっては、アフリカ各国との関係で得られる成果を念頭に置きつつ、良好事例を創出し、我が国の大学等に情報を周知することで、留学生の受入れを促進する。
中東	・我が国への留学の魅力や我が国の大学等の優れた点について集中的に広報し、留学生の受入れを促進する。 ・中東各国が用意する政府派遣奨学金を積極的に利用できるような環境整備を図る。
南西アジア	・企業の進出拠点多く形成されるインドを中心として、在外公館や我が国の関係機関と連携し、我が国への留学の魅力や我が国の大学等の優れた点について集中的に広報し、留学生の受入れを促進する。
東アジア	・東アジアの中でも、我が国との関係が強く親日国であり、資源確保の観点からも関係を強化することが重要なモンゴルを中心として、留学生の受入れを促進する。
南米	・南米は、我が国の高い技術に対する関心が高く、我が国にとっても、資源の確保と質の高い人材の受入れが重要であることから、主に工学及び農学分野の留学生の受入れを促進する。
米国	・学事層の柔軟化や大学間交流協定の締結促進により、短期的留学生の受入れを中心に、受入数を増加させる。
中東欧	・政府間の声明を踏まえた人的交流の強化を図る。

Figure 6. Prioritized Regions/Countries which can particularly contribute to the development of Japan and future response policies

- Southeast Asia (ASEAN): The ASEAN region is where exchanges with Japan are most active, and in the future, Japanese companies will also actively expand into these regions so while taking into account each country's situation, we will create a system to ensure a decent quality of education and aim for quantitative growth → discussion: With the rhetoric and emphasis on 'quantitative' economic growth, it seems that Japan is looking after its own interests of economic expansion in the ASEAN region rather than carefully considering what students from this region might want to do after studying in Japan.
- Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, is a region where great growth can be expected in the future, but there are great concerns about security and disease. In the future, when increasing the number of international students from Africa and keeping in mind the results obtained from relationships with African countries, we will promote the acceptance of international students by creating good practices and disseminating information to Japanese universities, etc. → discussion: Once again, the discourse regarding economic growth is emphasized, as well as potentially xenophobic concerns about 'security and disease'. The overall impression is that Japan can significantly benefit from Africa/students from Africa, but only when security or health-related inconveniences are addressed or when it suits Japan's needs.
- We will promote the acceptance of international students by intensively publicizing the attractiveness of studying in Japan and the excellent points of Japanese universities in the Middle East. We will create an environment to actively use government-sponsored

scholarships provided by Middle Eastern countries → discussion: Aware of the Middle East's growing economic prowess and prosperity, MEXT understands that many elite students from this region seek 'excellence,' and that usually equates to getting a degree or MBA at a prestigious or top-class university in the Anglosphere. For this reason, Japan's Ministry of Education assumes that perhaps a massive marketing campaign in the Middle East can compensate for what it might lack in excellent education.

- In Southwest Asia, East Asia, and India, where many companies have expanded their bases, we will intensively publicize the attractiveness of studying in Japan and the advantages of Japanese universities, etc. By cooperating with diplomatic missions abroad and relevant Japanese organizations, we can promote the acceptance of international students → discussion: similar to its approach to the ASEAN region, the emphasis on economic growth and overseas expansion is reinforced here. Instead of considering the pedagogic or educational needs of students from this region, neoliberal objectives and values dominate the discourse.

- With the intention of strengthening relations in order to secure resources, among all East Asian countries, we will especially promote the acceptance of foreign students from Mongolia, given its pro-Japan attitudes and strong ties with Japan → discussion: Given its lack of natural resources and heavy dependence on imports, naturally and rather conveniently, forming ties with Asian nations with an abundance of natural resources instead of investing in renewable energy is optimal for the Liberal Democratic Party. In addition, rather than trying to rebuild relationships with neighboring countries that Japan exploited during the war, resorting to allies or countries with 'pro Japan' attitudes implies convenience is valued over diplomacy. It also implies that students or individuals with 'pro Japan' attitudes are preferred or prioritized, which is arguably quite a narrow-minded and unsustainable way to attract students and possibly human resources.

- South America has a high level of interest in Japan's advanced technology, and because it is important for Japan to secure resources and accept high-quality human resources, we will promote the acceptance of international students mainly in the fields of engineering and agriculture → discussion: With its historical and bilateral ties with Brazil in terms of immigration, students and laborers from South America are of significant value to Japan. For the most part, Brazilians seeking opportunities in Japan have come as technical trainees and

found law-wage employment in the automobile manufacturing industry as factory workers (Yamazaki & Bugarin, 2022). With the emphasis on securing ‘resources’ and ‘human resources,’ as well as the fields of ‘engineering’ and ‘agriculture,’ one can infer that MEXT’s underlying intention is to secure valuable natural resources and indispensable human labour in work environments considered undesirable for Japanese nationals (such as farm or factory work).

- We will accept more students (but mainly short-term exchange students) from the US by making the academic calendar more flexible and promoting further inter-university exchange agreement contracts → discussion: Perhaps realizing that there are greater employment and entrepreneur opportunities for students in the US (as the largest economy in the world), the purpose of mainly attracting short-term exchange students could be considered an effort to create a façade of internationalizing domestic universities (by simply increasing the number of English-speaking students instead of providing more degrees or courses offered in English).

- We will work to strengthen exchanges based on the statements made between the governments of Central and Eastern Europe → discussion: The brevity of this proposal and the lack of mention of Northern and Western European countries assumes that students from these regions are wealthy enough to support their own studies. It could also imply that such students are neither valuable to Japan nor worth marketing to (considering the high living standards and work-life-balance that such countries usually offer). Unfortunately, by limiting opportunities for students from progressive-thinking countries, Japan limits the opportunities for the exchange of diverse values and attitudes and thereby remains isolated in a bubble of neoliberal conservatism.

5. Conclusion

In this article, the rhetoric in Japan’s Ministry of Education’s (MEXT) most recent and ambitious plan to attract outstanding research students (and in turn, highly-skilled workers) to Japan was analyzed and discussed. The basic media discourse analysis of news articles concerning Japanese higher education spanning from a pre- to post-pandemic context revealed that media reports tended to focus on: 1) Japan’s decline in global competitiveness, 2) Japan’s problems with attracting international students, and 3) Japan’s problem with securing and retaining human resources. While bleak or negative in tone, this is the backdrop of the current situation in Japan and the reason why the Ministry of Education is heavily investing in attracting international

students and possible human resources. By means of critical discourse analysis, a further analysis of MEXT's strategic proposal to attract more international students was also conducted. The findings and discussions revealed that the proposal's neoliberal bias framed international students as "investments" or mere sources of labour rather than knowledge-seeking individuals. By primarily focusing on scholarships for exceptional students from specific regions (where Japan's overseas expansion is expected) and in specific fields (where labor is in demand), Japan is creating obstacles for ordinarily talented students beyond these regions or majoring in different subjects. Although Japan is trying to raise the bar by placing greater emphasis on excellent scholars (who would probably study at highly-ranked and renowned universities elsewhere), it is digging its own hole in a context of population decline and a lingering economic recession. As noted earlier, the findings and discussions from this paper may give institutions in the education and employment sectors an opportunity to reassess their current support systems and programmes for lucrative foreign talent. Thus, here are some points which need to be considered or addressed: 1) rather than focusing on exceptional researchers or students, higher education institutions in Japan need to attract a diverse range of students in various fields and majors to secure human resources and encourage innovation; 2) the Ministry of Education needs to extend or provide more generous scholarships to students who deserve them; and 3) universities and businesses need to provide career pathways and encourage a complete overhaul of the strict and complicated recruitment procedures in Japan to ensure graduates stay.

Lastly, aside from simply offering scholarships and internationalizing its universities with a handful of international students and token English-speaking adjunct lecturers, Japan needs to internationalize its communities and companies because if this fails to change, graduates will seek employment in countries that boast more cultural diversity, tolerance, and lifestyles that value a comfortable work-life balance. With its rapidly ageing and dwindling population paired with its deteriorating competitiveness and economic robustness, observing Japan's plans and policies in action may serve as a lesson or model for countries facing similar problems in the near future.

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