

# International Researchers in Japanese Companies

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To compete in the global economy and strengthen Japan's highly specialized domestic industrial structure, the Japanese government has launched several policies to attract foreign talents. In 2020, the number of foreign workers was 1.72 million, 2.5 times more than 10 years before. Moreover, since the "Point-Based Preferential Immigration Treatment for Highly Skilled Foreign Professionals" was issued in 2012 (aiming to certify 40,000 highly skilled foreign professionals by the end of 2022), the total number of certified cases reached 29,084 by June 2021.

In order to develop more global human resources and improve the international competitiveness of Japanese industry and business, companies have made efforts to attract excellent international researchers and expect them to play an active role in their workplaces. This is comparable with what universities and research institutes have done.

While the global mobility of human resources and the number of international researchers working in Japanese companies have increased, little research has been carried out about them as individuals, about their motivations to come to Japan, what roles they play, what contributions they make, and what challenges they face. The authors of [the study on which this article is based](#) conducted interview surveys with 11 international researchers through online platforms from September 2020 to January 2022, aiming to make an inventory of these issues and compare them with characteristics of international faculty at Japanese universities, identified in prior research.

The interviewees, six men and five women aged 20 to 40, came from China, Mongolia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Taiwan and had all graduated from Japanese universities. They were employed at 10 different companies within the manufacture, pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and information industries.

## Motivations

While international faculty are primarily driven by professional and academic reasons when moving to Japan, our interviews suggest that international researchers are more attracted by stable positions and more advantageous salaries available at Japanese companies. In comparison, most young international faculty at Japanese universities are hired on fixed terms and poorly paid for their workload. In addition, interviewees from countries with a lower GDP per capita than Japan are driven more by economic reasons. By gender, female researchers appear to place greater value on job stability, benefits, and the culture of their affiliated companies. The motivations of international researchers for working in Japanese companies have not been found in the study of international faculty at Japan's universities.

## Work Roles and Contributions

Widely differing from international faculty at Japanese universities, the interviewees were mainly involved in applied research and product design and development, following, in most cases, the requirements of their companies rather than their own scholarly and research interests. In comparison, international faculty have a greater degree of academic freedom and autonomy.

They were also expected to engage in their companies' international business, leveraging their international background and multilingual abilities. This is similar to international faculty, who are strongly expected to undertake any activity that cannot be performed by their Japanese colleagues, especially to help enhance the international reputation of their universities. Several interviewees believed that they could provide advice from an international perspective, promote international cooperation, and stimulate

## Abstract

To develop global human resources and improve the international competitiveness of Japan's industry and business, Japanese companies have made efforts to attract excellent international researchers, expecting them to play an active role in their workplaces. This article explores some aspects of their personal identities, their motivations, work roles, and contributions, as well as the challenges that they face, compared with international faculty employed at Japanese universities.

*Due to work pressure and long working hours, most of the interviewed researchers, especially the women, found it difficult to balance their work and private life.*

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the integration of different cultures in their companies. More importantly, most of them stressed that they could bring new insights to research, product development, and perhaps to the ethos of their companies.

However, some interviewees mentioned that the effectiveness of their contributions largely depended on organizational arrangements at their companies, expectations on both sides, and other factors. In most cases, international researchers did not participate in governance and management issues, which may have prevented them from contributing more. Moreover, the lack of familiarity of international researchers with the systems and politics of their companies may have limited their participation in governance and other company functions. This is different from some international faculty, who have become middle-level or even institutional leaders in Japanese universities. This is especially true in the case of private universities, where some international faculty have even become presidents.

### Challenges

Due to work pressure and long working hours, most of the interviewed researchers, especially the women, found it difficult to balance their work and private life. This finding was not confirmed in the study of international faculty at Japanese universities. Language is another issue: Although all interviewees earned their degrees from Japanese universities, most of them still felt that there was a communication barrier with their Japanese colleagues. Having a good mastery of the English language was also very important, especially when they needed to do research and communicate with researchers in other countries. Many international researchers found it very challenging to be expected to use their mother tongue, Japanese, and English when assuming their duties and responsibilities. In comparison, for most international faculty in Japan, the main challenges are unstable employment, lower research funding and salaries, heavy teaching and research workload, and uncertain career prospects.

### Conclusion

Our findings from the interviews suggest that international researchers at Japanese companies share some similarities with those hired at universities. For example, most come from Asian countries, graduated from Japan's universities, and are attracted by favorable research and academic environments. They are expected to undertake international collaboration with partners abroad on behalf of their employers. Very few participate in governance and management issues, and they face language problems at work. Unlike international faculty, they are required to do research, R&D, and product design to respond to the needs of their companies.

From the perspective of international higher education, it is important that Japanese universities provide more English-degree programs to attract international students who do not speak Japanese, and hire high-quality graduates not only originating from Asian countries, but also from English-speaking countries, to work in the country's universities, research institutes, and companies. This may make it easier for Japanese companies to hire global talent. Further, Japanese universities need to make more efforts to help their international students and staff improve their proficiency in Japanese. They should also give credit for internships and recognize them as part of the curriculum, and provide more internship opportunities to international students, related to their majors and future careers. These initiatives will greatly help international graduates to better communicate with their domestic colleagues and become used to their workplaces and job responsibilities more quickly. ▲