

International Student Policies in Japan and South Korea in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Attracting international students has been a central internationalization effort for higher education institutions around the world. While English-speaking countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have been major destinations for international students, non-Anglophone countries such as Japan and South Korea have strived to increase their international competitiveness and attract international students through government initiatives. Japan set a goal to attract 300,000 international students by 2020, and South Korea aimed to attain 200,000 students by 2023. They successfully reached their goals. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 first halted and then changed student mobility flows. Nevertheless, the pandemic brought the international student market game-changing opportunities. The pandemic's aftermath is therefore a pivotal period for higher education institutions to reexamine ways to recruit and attract international students. This study thus explores how Japan and South Korea are striving to reattract international students through government initiatives in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The governments of Japan and South Korea have been key drivers for the countries' internationalization. Both countries have experienced a sharp decline in childbirth rates (1.26 in Japan and 0.78 in South Korea as of 2022), leading to decreasing college student populations. Therefore, smaller scale higher education institutions, especially in rural areas, face difficulties in filling their student quotas and experience bankruptcies. In Japan, 53.3 percent of private universities experienced difficulties in filling their student quotas in 2023. In South Korea, 20 universities have shut their campuses since 2000, 19 of which are in rural areas outside Seoul. Therefore, attracting diverse student populations, including international students, has been a key initiative for the governments of Japan and South Korea.

International Student Policy in Japan

Japan introduced the 300,000 International Student Plan in 2008 to attain this number of international students by 2020. The country achieved this goal by 2019, one year before the target year. However, the students' number declined to approximately 230,000 in 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, in June 2022, the government announced the aim for Japanese higher education institutions to recover from this sharp decline and return to the student numbers from before the pandemic by 2027.

Following this announcement, the government introduced its new internationalization policy: the "Japan-Mobility and Internationalization: Re-engaging and Accelerating Initiative for Future Generations," or J-MIRAI on April 27, 2023. The initiative has two-fold goals to achieve by 2033: attract 400,000 inbound students to study in Japan (380,000 in universities and Japanese language schools and 20,000 at the high school level) and send 500,000 outbound students (150,000 seeking degrees or pursuing long-term credit-bearing programs and 230,000 engaging in mid- and short-term programs at university level, 110,000 joining short-term programs of less than three months and 10,000 participating in programs of more than three months at the high school level).

The country's past initiatives have focused on tertiary-level education, but this new initiative has set target goals for each level, starting with secondary-level education. Moreover, through this initiative, the government aims to shift the idea from simply

Abstract

Higher education institutions in Japan and South Korea have strived to attract target numbers of international students. While each country had (nearly) reached its goals, the COVID-19 pandemic affected student flows. Recently, three years after the pandemic, the governments of Japan and South Korea announced new policies to reattract international student populations. This study examines how Japan and South Korea are reinvigorating their efforts.

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increasing the number of inbound and outbound student populations toward enhancing both the quantity and quality of students, teaching and learning, academic services, and support infrastructure. In addition, industry, academia, and government need to work collaboratively to establish a seamless transition for students from academia to the professional world in Japan. This will help elevate the post-graduation employment rate of international students in Japan from 48 percent in 2018 to 60 percent by 2033.

International Student Policy in South Korea

In 2012, the South Korean government launched the “Study Korea 2020 Project” to attract international students by 2020. The target year was extended to 2023. South Korea successfully attracted 207,125 students as of June 2023 and achieved its target goal. However, it experienced a decline in international students because of the pandemic. At the end of August 2023, the government announced a new international student policy—the “Study Korea 300K Project”—to further promote the internationalization initiative and boost the number of international students to 300,000 by 2027.

This new policy aims to increase international student populations, help skilled students settle in South Korea after graduating from tertiary education, and enhance international competitiveness at higher education institutions. To achieve this, the government aims to expand government scholarship, or the Global Korea Scholarship, which prioritizes students studying in STEM fields at schools outside the Seoul region. In addition, the government has eased language and visa requirements to study in South Korea, increased English-taught courses, and offered easier and faster pathways to permanent residency for students with advanced degrees in specific science and technology fields.

Similar to the situation in Japan, international students in South Korea tend to leave the country after graduating from higher education institutions. According to the National Statistical Office, 62 percent of international students go back home after gaining a doctoral degree in South Korea. Therefore, South Korea aims to counter the outflows of skilled professionals through the implementation of this new international student policy.

Challenges and Concerns

The pandemic provided both governments and higher education institutions with the opportunity to reexamine the internationalization of higher education and to develop new approaches and strategies. Now that international student mobility has returned to prepandemic levels, Japan and South Korea are poised to reenter the evolved international student market with fresh initiatives. Reflecting on past international student policies and lessons learned, they are prepared to engage in the new international student market with clear objectives.

Historically, internationalization policies prioritized quantity, such as the numbers of international students, over quality. The new initiatives aim to balance both the quantity and quality aspects of internationalization. However, concerns persist regarding the quality of education and students, especially because policies intend to achieve specific numbers of international students by a target year.

Internationalization was once a strategy primarily reserved for higher education institutions. Now, it is a vital concern for entire nations. Both countries aspire to attract talented international students to their higher education institutions and hope to retain them postgraduation, so that they stay to live and work within their borders. For effective implementation of these new international student policies, it is essential to understand that higher education institutions cannot function in isolation as the sole drivers of internationalization. A collaborative approach involving industry, academia, and government is crucial. To ensure a seamless transition from the academic to the business community, support for international students from both sectors is necessary.

A disparity exists between urban and rural higher education institutions in their internationalization efforts. Urban institutions tend to attract both local and international students more than their rural counterparts. Consequently, urban and rural higher education institutions should develop distinct internationalization strategies to address their specific challenges.

Japan and South Korea face similar challenges and share common objectives in their international student policies. They need to make a transition from competing

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for international students to collaborating in attracting them to the East Asian region. They could learn from each other's experiences, and jointly draw international students to the region. ▲