

The Problematic Decline of Japanese International Students

Yukiko Shimmi

Yukiko Shimmi is a research assistant at the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. E-mail: shimmi@bc.edu.

Where have Japanese international students gone? The number of Japanese students who study in the United States has decreased by 15.1 percent to 29,264 in 2009/10, according to the Open Doors Report of the Institute of International Education. This decline has attracted considerable attention in Japan. While various Japanese media have expressed concerns about this phenomenon, several professionals at Japanese universities and educational institutions observe a stable desire to study abroad among young Japanese people.

Several structural issues effecting the current declines are explored—a demographic shift, an increased capacity at domestic universities, an economic stagnation, the season of job hunting for Japanese college students, and academic requirements. Then, new trends and approaches for the increase are discussed.

PATTERNS OF DECLINE

The demographic shift in Japanese society is often referred to as a cause for the decline in the number of Japanese international students. According to the Japanese government, the number of people in the 20-to-29 age group peaked at 19 million in 1996, and decreased to 14 million in 2010. The Japanese government analyzes multiple factors of the decline of birthrate in Japan—such as, the financial burden to raise

children; Japanese working styles that often require overtime work, which reduces time for the family; and an increase of young workers who have less financial stability. This demographic shift is in fact underlying the current decline in the number of internationally mobile Japanese students.

The expansion of the enrollment capacity of Japanese higher education has provided additional local capacity and has contributed to the decline of Japanese students going abroad. Since the late 1980s, the capacity has increased mainly at four-year undergraduate institutions and graduate schools in Japan. Attending domestic institutions is less costly, economically. As a result, the country accommodates a relatively larger number of college-age Japanese students; in turn, fewer potential students study abroad for degrees.

Economic factors have also effected the recent decrease of Japanese international students. Japanese students seem to avoid the United States because of the high tuition fees and expenses. Further oncoming attractions are the emergence of English programs in non-English-speaking countries and an increase in the programs in nontraditional destinations. These non-US programs are often offered for a shorter and less expensive period.

The job-hunting system and timing for Japanese undergraduate students seems to be another factor contributing to this trend. Traditionally, the job-search process for Japanese college students starts in the fall of the junior year. Many study-abroad students hope to start their job-search process no later than domestic students' schedule. Study-abroad experiences or a degree from the United States have not always given advantages for Japanese students in the domestic job market in Japan. Rather, the experience could be considered negatively by potential employers if returning students

cannot readjust to the norms of Japanese society, though this perception has been changing.

Academic requirements also issue an obstacle for Japanese students who hope to study at a prestigious institution. In particular, the new system of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (Internet-based test), which includes a speaking section, seems to be a challenge for Japanese students. According to the Educational Testing Service, the score of this test for Japanese students in 2009 rated only 27th among 30 Asian nationalities.

NEW TRENDS

With these trends, Japanese international educators also see a stable desire for studying year undergraduate institutions and graduate schools in Japan. Attending domestic institutions is less costly, economically. As a result, the country accommodates a relatively larger number of college-age Japanese students; in turn, fewer potential students study abroad for degrees.

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The job-hunting system and timing for Japanese undergraduate students seems abroad among young Japanese people. Several study-abroad advisers at universities and educational institutions observe that current college students are oriented in the same

way as the older generation. However, they are more concerned about the costs, risks, and outcomes of studying in a foreign country.

Actually, the number of international students who study in the United States as nondegree students has been increasing in the current overall declining trend. The Japanese government reported a stable increase (yet, with a moderate decrease in 2008) in the number of Japanese students who studied in the United States, based on university-exchange agreements from 4,513 in 2001 to 6,403 in 2008. Participating in short-term or study-abroad exchange programs might be a realistic way to relieve students' concerns about studying abroad.

To support this new trend, the Japanese government has created scholarships for exchange programs, covering under three months. Leading institutions have started to develop predeparture support for short-term, study-abroad programs. Japanese educators expect that the participants of these short-term programs might later participate in a longer study-abroad program.

Moreover, providing information at an early stage for students is another approach for support. Some information providers have started to reach out to high school students as well as to parents and teachers. Some universities emphasize orientations for freshmen, after their enrollment. These efforts are targeted for students to start their study-abroad planning ahead of normal patterns—considering the process of job hunting, as well as preparation for the Test of English as a Foreign Language and academic qualifications.

Recent changes in companies' recruitment policies might seriously affect Japanese students' study-abroad attitudes. Several Japanese companies have announced that they value international experiences, as well as foreign-language abilities, to respond to changes in Japanese society and labor markets—due to globalization. Some

companies also focus on the recruitment of non-Japanese students with those abilities. Since one of the concerns of Japanese college students is job hunting, this change in the recruitment policy might have more impact on encouraging Japanese students to study abroad.

The recent decline in the number of Japanese students in the United States has provoked a discussion in Japan. While many government and industry leaders hope more students gain international experiences for a proactive presence in the globalized world, Japanese students tend to look more realistically at costs and opportunities for education and job opportunities. Though many factors are contributing to the trend of decline, the change of the recruitment policies among Japanese companies as well as support for short-term, study-abroad programs might increase the numbers of students who actively consider studying abroad.