

Crossing Borders, Shaping Careers: Internationalisation of Education and Labour in Contemporary Japan

Sept. 26, 2025 / 14:00 – 19:00

Workshop at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo

Organizer: Steve R. ENTRICH, University of Zurich & DIJ Scholar in Residence

In the fields of Japanese studies, education, sociology, economics, gender and migration studies, the internationalization of education and labour is a highly timely topic and once again at the top of Japan's national agenda. In response to Japan's economic stagnation since the "bubble burst" in the early 1990s, various reform proposals and policy measures have been introduced to free Japan from its self-imposed economic isolation (so-called Galápagos syndrome). In particular, the renewed push towards internationalization (*kokusaika*) was expected to "revitalize" the labour market. In fact, recent studies indicate that many companies have started to hire more qualified foreign employees to drive internal internationalization and are increasingly screening applicants based on whether they possess transnational human capital (THC), i.e. foreign language skills and intercultural competencies. To increase the proportion of global human resources among the Japanese workforce, two strategies are being pursued: (1) the internationalization of Japanese education to produce more high-skilled Japanese workers with high levels of THC; and (2) controlled immigration of foreign high-skilled workers. In April 2023, for example, the Council for the Creation of Future Education (CCFE), chaired by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, formulated a new strategic initiative. It aims to significantly increase the number of foreign students to up to 400,000 in the coming years following the COVID-19 slump. In the opposite direction, the even more ambitious goal is to send 500,000 Japanese students abroad every year. How well placed the firm belief that this internationalization strategy will pay off is anything but clear.

The workshop aims to provide new insights into the outcomes of the recent attempts to push *kokusaika* in Japan with regards to (1) the effects of transnational education (such as international student mobility) of Japanese on their labour market outcomes and (2) labour market integration of immigrants and international graduates in Japan. The contributions present innovative theoretical approaches and empirically sound analyses that provide new insights on individual career paths, as well as gender, ethnic, educational and social inequalities in contemporary Japan.

All contributions shall be published in a special issue of the Social Science Japan Journal (SSJJ) following the workshop. The workshop therefore also serves to connect the authors with each other and with interested researchers (DIJ and beyond) to stimulate future research and cooperation and to provide feedback for the further development of the contributions.

Program

14:00 – 14:05

Welcome address

Barbara HOLTHUS (DIJ Tokyo)

14:05 – 14:15

Welcome & Introduction

Steve R. ENTRICH (University of Zurich & DIJ Scholar in Residence)

14:15 – 15:45

Session 1

Transnational Paths: Education, Mobility, and Labour Market Integration of Japanese Nationals

Chair: Hirohisa TAKENOSHITA (Keio University)

14:15 – 14:35

Paper 1: The Economic Impact of Educational Internationalization on Japan's Labour Market Outcomes

Akira MURATA (Chiba Keizai University)

In the wake of prolonged economic stagnation that has persisted since the asset price bubble burst in the early 1990s, Japan has initiated a strategic shift towards internationalization, known domestically as *kokusaika*. This shift is part of a broader effort to invigorate the country's labour market, which faces challenges such as an aging population, a declining birthrate, and a rigid employment system. By embracing internationalization, Japan aims to enhance its global competitiveness, attract foreign talent, and foster innovation through diverse perspectives.

This study investigates the economic effects of educational internationalization initiatives on labour market outcomes for both Japanese nationals and foreign professionals. By analysing pre- and post-pandemic data, we assess how programs such as study abroad, English language education, and international academic collaborations influence employment opportunities, wage levels, and career progression. Employing advanced econometric models and utilizing micro-level data from governmental and institutional sources, this research examines the role of transnational human capital (THC) in reducing social, ethnic, and gender inequalities within the labour market. Additionally, we evaluate the efficacy of policies designed to attract high-skilled foreign workers and facilitate their integration into Japan's economy. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and industry leaders on optimizing internationalization strategies to achieve sustainable economic growth and social inclusivity. By demonstrating the link between international education programs and improved labour market performance, this study underscores the critical importance of continued investment in educational internationalization as a catalyst for revitalizing Japan's economy.

14:35 – 14:55

Paper 2: New paths towards career and happiness among younger Japanese adults? The gendered impact of international student mobility on labour market outcomes and life satisfaction

Steve R. ENTRICH (University of Zurich), Sho FUJIHARA (The University of Tokyo) & David CHIAVACCI (University of Zurich)

With transnational human capital becoming more important for individual career success in the globalizing Japanese economy, this paper focuses on the impact of international student mobility (ISM) on economic (labour market) and individual returns (life satisfaction) among the post-ice-age generation, i.e. those joining the labour market after 2004. This study extends our understanding of the potential impact of ISM by combining insights from job competition and happiness research, examining gender inequality in ISM effects, and empirically examining how post-ice-age cohorts in Japan may utilise ISM to break out of traditional, gender-stereotypical life paths, contributing to explaining higher mean life satisfaction of this generation. Using data from the SSJDA Panel (2021-23), results show that ISM (of substantial length but less than a year) contributes to higher labour market outcomes and life satisfaction for both, men and women. However, we also detected significant gender differences in ISM effects: the mean effects of ISM are greater for men for both examined outcomes indicating persistent gender inequalities in Japan. Nevertheless, we have reason to believe that ISM may also support a more progressive, gender-equitable work and family model as an alternative to the traditional gendered life course in Japan.

14:55 – 15:15

Paper 3: The post-study abroad experience: Student reintegration as future global human resources

Ana Sofia HOFMEYR (Kansai University), Fern SAKAMOTO (Nanzan University) & Thomas FAST (Notre Dame Seishin University)

The cultivation of global jinzai, or “global human resources” (GHR), has become a key goal of Japanese higher education, and student mobility programs have been widely promoted as a way to foster the skills deemed desirable in Japanese GHR. Research suggests that study abroad may impact the career trajectory of students in Japan, but little is known about the experiences of student returnees and how their skills as GHR are cultivated, evaluated, and utilised in a domestic setting post-study abroad. This article presents the results of a qualitative study designed to investigate the post-study abroad experiences of university students in Japan. Seven mini-focus groups were conducted at national, public, and private universities with students (N=14) who had spent at least one semester abroad. Thematic content analysis revealed reintegration challenges in relation to students’ job-hunting activities and career paths. Findings suggest a disconnect between the industry push for GHR and hiring practices experienced by students. This article explores the challenges affecting the successful re-entry of students into Japan, the impact of study abroad on students’ search for employment, and it suggests ways in which universities and potential employers can continue to foster and utilise student GHR competencies post-study abroad.

15:15 – 15:45

Discussion & Conclusion (Q&A)

15:45 – 16:00

Coffee break

16:00 – 17:00

Session 2

From Graduation to Career: Pathways of Highly Skilled Immigrants in Japan

Chair: Steve R. ENTRICH (University of Zurich)

16:00 – 16:20

Paper 4: Employment Trends Among International Graduates in Japan

Yuko RYAN (Shizuoka University)

Although Japan has sought to revitalise its labour market through internationalisation, it has so far provided relatively limited channels for the integration of highly-skilled foreign labour. Of these pathways, one of the most promising is the drive to retain international graduates educated in Japanese universities, which became a central focus of Japan’s education, labour, and economic internationalisation policies throughout the 2010s. Against the backdrop of the government drive to expand international student acceptance and retention, this study examines the career outcomes of international degree students in Japan at the end of the 2010s, using empirical data.

The study is divided into two parts, and both use secondary data of nation-wide surveys conducted by the Japan Student Support Organization (JASSO). The first part applies logistic regression analysis to data from the International Student Career Outcome Survey, to identify the attributes associated with a higher likelihood of securing employment in Japan. The second part investigates the conditions influencing employment outcomes such as career aspirations, the length of stay in Japan and Japanese language proficiency. Drawing on data from the Self-Funded International Students’ Life Survey, this section explores the associations between these conditions and the employment trends identified in Part 1, offering deeper insights into the factors shaping career outcomes of international graduates.

In 2019, Japan achieved the goal it had established in 2008, of hosting 300,000 international students. Consequently, this study focuses on 2019 data, as a benchmark year for evaluating this achievement including related initiatives. Furthermore, 2019 graduates were as yet unaffected by the socio-economic disruptions caused by the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic, allowing for a clearer analysis of pre-pandemic employment trends.

The findings of this study will contribute to the Social Science Japan Journal special issue by offering new insights into the international graduates' post-study career and by complementing existing literature on the economic integration of foreign labour in Japan.

16:20 – 16:40

Paper 5: Place of education and immigrant's wage in Japan: The role of field of study

Hirohisa TAKENOSHITA (Keio University)

This study investigates the influence of the place of education and field of study on the labour market outcomes of immigrant workers in Japan. Immigrants face significant wage disadvantages due to the limited transferability of foreign-acquired skills and qualifications. However, recent research suggests that STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) degrees have high cross-national transferability because skills and knowledge in the STEM fields are more universal and less country-specific and because STEM skills are highly demanded in the host society's labour market. The study uses survey data from immigrants in Tokyo's Adachi municipality, collected in 2021 and 2023, focusing on their employment sectors, occupational status, and wages. This data covers individuals aged 20-59, and this study excluded self-employed or unemployed participants. Findings reveal that immigrants with STEM degrees earned higher wages and faced fewer occupational mismatches compared to those with non-STEM degrees, regardless of whether their education was completed abroad or in Japan. STEM degrees' higher transferability enables immigrants to access professional jobs more effectively. Conversely, higher wages for Japan-educated migrants can be partially attributed to better Japanese language proficiency.

16:40 – 17:00

Discussion & Conclusion (Q&A)

17:00 – 17:15

Coffee break

17:15 – 18:45

Session 3

Precarity, Identity, and Cultural Capital: Immigrant and Second-Generation Careers in Japan

Chair: Akira MURATA (Chiba Keizai University)

17:15 – 17:35

Paper 6: Rites of Precarity: Immigrant Labor and the Illusion of Inclusion in Japan's Peri-Urban Markets

Brandon BODENSTEIN (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

In Japan's quest for economic revival, the promise of *kokusaika*—internationalization—has become a guiding force. Through policies aimed at attracting highly skilled labour and nurturing transnational human capital, Japan envisions a future invigorated by the global exchange. Yet, beneath the veneer of these aspirations lies a neglected reality: the intricate, precarious world of immigrant labourers in Japan's peri-urban landscapes. This study, grounded in immersive ethnographic fieldwork in Ibaraki, delves into the “hand-cash” jobs that define immigrant livelihoods—informal, often invisible labour arrangements that circulate within Japan's shadowed labour markets. Far from passive actors in this grand vision of internationalization, immigrants craft survival strategies to navigate the unpredictability and exclusions of Japan's formal labour structures. Through these calculated choices, they find ways to endure, but in doing so, they also reinforce the socio-economic disparities that Japan's policies claim to address. This entangled dance between local employers and immigrant workers reveals a mutual yet unequal dependency, where precarity becomes both a means of survival and a barrier to stability. In these margins, Japan's internationalization project unravels, exposing the limits of a framework that prizes transnational competencies without confronting the stark stratifications embedded in its labour market. This study sheds light on peri-urban

labour markets as frontier zones—liminal spaces where dreams of global belonging clash with the gritty realities of everyday survival. By centring the lived experiences of these immigrant labourers, this paper calls for a reimagining of *kokusaika*—one that recognizes the contributions of all workers, reconfiguring internationalization not as an illusion of inclusion but as a genuine pathway toward resilience and integration.

17:35 – 17:55

Paper 7: Building Careers Between 'Japanese' and 'Foreigners': Educational and Professional Development of High-SES Second-Generation Immigrants in Japan and Their Utilization of Cultural Capital

Ksenia ZOLOTAREVA (The University of Tokyo)

Immigrants and foreign talent are often considered by existing scholarship and policies as facing significant barriers in the Japanese labour market. Studies highlight rigid workplace hierarchies, long working hours, and limited accommodation for cultural and professional diversity as factors contributing to high turnover rates among foreign employees (Liu-Farrer and Hof, 2018). Even international students with comparable degrees are often treated as "outsiders" and relegated to lower-ranking roles (Liu-Farrer and Shire, 2021). Similarly, second-generation immigrants face "ethnic penalties," which hinder job searches and limit upward mobility (Higuchi and Inaba, 2023).

This study investigates the often-overlooked experiences of second-generation immigrants who have succeeded in attaining high socioeconomic status (SES) and have experience working in Japanese corporate organizations. It explores how they acquire and strategically employ cultural capital during their transition from education to employment and throughout their career progression. The research targets individuals with non-Japanese parents who belong to Japan's top 20% income group. Interviews with 31 participants raised in Japan were analysed using Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, the concept of ethnic capital, and Ong's cultural capital framework as applied in the immigrant context.

Findings indicate that while participants often came from households with abundant cultural capital, Japanese-specific cultural knowledge was largely acquired through external environments such as schools. They internalized Japanese cultural capital and global cultural capital but showed caution in emphasizing cultural capital from their countries of origin, often avoiding the use of ethnic capital. Utilizing heritage-related cultural capital correlated with higher job turnover but proved useful in entrepreneurial endeavours post-corporate exit. These results challenge the conventional view that second-generation immigrants often utilize ethnic capital to advance in white-collar careers (Nukaga et al., 2023; Tsubota, 2021). This study underscores the importance of strategic adaptation to Japanese labour market norms for second-generation immigrants achieving high SES.

17:55 – 18:15

Paper 8: Lived Experiences of Labour Market Integration: The Role of Ethnic Identity, Education, and Citizenship Among Second-Generation Japanese Brazilians

Ge HUANG (University of York) & *Thomas Compton* (University of York)

This study examines the integration experiences of second-generation Brazilians of Japanese descent (Nikkeijin) in Japan, focusing on the intersection of education, labour market outcomes, and socio-cultural barriers. Through ethnographic research and critical discourse analysis, interviews with 10 first-generation and 31 second-generation Japanese Brazilians provide unique insights into how education—particularly language acquisition and schooling—shapes labour market integration. Although Japan's internationalisation efforts emphasise developing global human resources, Nikkeijin face diverse integration outcomes, with many encountering socio-economic barriers despite their ethnic ties to Japan. Often referred to as 'invisible' immigrants due to their ethnic connections, their varied experiences of inclusion and exclusion make them a crucial group for studying the complexities of integration. Findings reveal that language proficiency and educational background are critical determinants of labour market success, with respondents fluent in Japanese securing more stable employment compared to those with limited proficiency. However, socio-economic advancement does not always mitigate discrimination or guarantee full inclusion. This study further shows that citizenship status and ethnic identity strongly influence labour market outcomes, with non-citizens and those identifying more with their Brazilian heritage facing greater challenges in accessing higher-paying, stable jobs. The originality of this research lies in its

twofold contribution. First, it fills a gap in the literature on immigrant integration in Japan by focusing on the underexplored experiences of second-generation Japanese Brazilians, offering rich qualitative data on their lived experiences. Second, it introduces a multidimensional framework integrating both objective indicators (legal status, employment) and subjective factors (ethnic identity, sense of belonging). The study's findings highlight the need for more inclusive educational and labour policies to address the distinct challenges faced by immigrant communities, contributing to ongoing debates on social and ethnic inequalities in Japan's increasingly multicultural workforce.

18:15 – 18:45

Discussion & Conclusion (Q&A)

18:45 – 19:00

Concluding Remarks