Special issue: *Belonging and home-making in the internationalised campus*

Research article

Understanding international student experiences in Japanese higher education: belonging as an indicator of internationalisation success

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Abstract

The globalisation of English and the status of English as a lingua franca have boosted student mobility globally, even in countries where English is not the dominant language. Along with native English-speaking countries, non-native English-speaking countries are also turning to English as a part of their internationalisation strategies to attract talented students. Many have imported the template provided by centre countries, setting up English-medium instruction and English-taught programmes to attract international students. With a growing number of international students, Japanese universities are offering more English-medium instruction and English-taught programmes to accommodate sociolinguistic diversity in education. While higher education campuses in Japan are becoming more multifaceted, there is little research published on the overall experiences of international students, especially their lives outside the classroom. Therefore, to better understand the international student voice, this article focuses on the

non-academic needs of international students to develop a broader conversation around internationalisation policies and the leadership and management of incoming students. Data analysis shows sociolingual and cultural issues impacting international students daily, with internationalisation efforts often isolated to certain faculties. International students frequently need support to navigate access to services on and off campus, or to feel included in university life. Such challenges can be seen as issues affecting international students' ability to control their daily lives or to feel a sense of belonging within the university. With many English-medium instruction and English-taught programmes marketing themselves as not requiring Japanese proficiency, this article suggests that enhancing a system for supporting international students' personal challenges can impact students' academic experience and success.

Keywords internationalisation; Japan; non-academic needs; management of policies; belonging; acceptance; sociocultural inclusion; sociocultural exclusion

Introduction

According to Maslow (1943, 1970), in the hierarchy of needs, a sense of belonging or connection is paramount for helping individuals reach their full potential. In 1970, Maslow expanded on this framework, integrating cognitive needs into his model, and placing it sixth after belongingness. He argued that for individuals to excel intellectually and embrace new knowledge and experiences, they must first have a sense of belonging – to feel comfortable in their environment. To put it simply, positive experiences and perspectives help people thrive, fostering a sense of belonging (Bergerson and Coon, 2022). It is a crucial ingredient for promoting mental and physical health, and this is especially true for international students, as it determines how they adjust or overcome challenges, and whether they feel isolated or supported. For international students, this sense of belonging, or having someone to support them, is ever more critical as they embark on a new life – learning about another culture and using a different language. Thus, for international students to thrive in their studies, it is essential for them to feel that they are a part of the campus.

While traditionally the flow of international students has been from East to West; more non-native English-speaking countries are internationalising their campuses using English as a lingua franca. Japan is one such country. In 2012, the Japanese government acknowledged the need for a global education initiative (MEXT, 2012). It has since introduced several policies to increase the number of international students and to develop its English education initiatives at lower levels of education. It is now estimated that 'over one-third of Japanese universities' offer some form of English-medium instruction (EMI) to their undergraduates (Brown, 2015: 419). Such courses are becoming progressively diverse, culturally and linguistically, as more international students with varied cultural backgrounds and expectations join Japan's student body. Teaching methods and styles are also transforming from traditional lectures delivered in a didactic manner to focus on cooperative learning and immersion, with English as a common language. While various studies have been conducted on the success of EMI in the classroom in Japan, there needs to be more research on evaluating internationalisation efforts to support the lives of international students outside the classroom.

Most international students in Japanese higher education study through English; however, the reality outside their university programme is different. English is not a dominant language on campus, and there is often little English spoken in broader society. Accordingly, the ability of international students to converse in Japanese is often a gatekeeper to information or accessing services on and off campus. Likewise, it also influences international students' ability to communicate with their peers and build friendships. Frequently, cultural nuances influence intercultural understanding, communication and behaviour, which can lead to miscommunication or difficulty settling into a new country and culture. Likewise, as Hausmann et al. (2007) note, when a sense of care and belonging increases, academic performance also excels. They are interlinked. Thus, when measuring internationalisation success

in higher education institutions (HEIs), a sense of belonging is critical in evaluating the success of support systems.

Objectives and rationale

To understand student experiences outside the classroom, an empirical investigation is necessary to determine how successful HEIs in Japan are in meeting the needs of a global student population. This is especially so with the Council for the Creation of Future Education (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2023) pushing to increase the number of international students to over 400,000 by 2033, and to promote the retention of international students in English-taught programmes (ETPs) post-education. Accordingly, it is necessary to evaluate current internationalisation provisions to ensure the success of policies. Therefore, this study examines internationalisation efforts in one private university in Tokyo, focusing on degree-seeking international students, as they are more likely to transition into the job market, compared to non-degree-seeking international students. For this study, the following research questions are explored:

1. How is Japan meeting its 300,000 International Students Plan policy goals (MEXT, 2008)?
2. What are international students' perceptions and experiences of higher education internationalisation in Japan?

The macro sociopolitical context of internationalisation

This section reviews the macro sociopolitical background surrounding Japanese higher education and governmental policy to understand the higher education context in Japan. It mainly focuses on internationalisation and globalisation, the notions and practices characterising current educational policy outlined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). It also considers how these notions and practices have affected Japanese education, and how such macro contexts have influenced and developed the environment for EMI.

A definition of internationalisation

Internationalisation is a strategy that universities and governments adopt along with the macro phenomenon of globalisation. While internationalisation and globalisation are often used interchangeably and are undoubtedly related (Giddens, 1984), they indicate two different matters. According to Altbach and Knight (2007: 290): 'Globalisation is the context of economic and academic trends that are part of the reality of the 21st century. Internationalisation includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions – and even individuals – to cope with the global academic environment.' To clarify, internationalisation exists as a conscious effort, as practices or policies in the face of globalisation.

In contrast, globalisation indicates a macro-social (somewhat unconscious and ongoing) phenomenon. In education, it is understood as 'the integration of an international or intercultural dimension into the tripartite mission of teaching, research and service functions of Higher Education' (Maringe and Foskett, 2010: 1). It is also valued to prepare students to 'respect cultural diversity to counterbalance the perceived homogenising effect of globalisation' (Knight, 1997: 11), since it possibly nurtures a reflexive point of view of one's cultural background. In this sense, internationalisation is deemed necessary as a possible means for expanding intercultural knowledge, shaping attitudes, nurturing tolerance and developing communication skills and competency in globalisation. The following section reviews the context of internationalisation policy in Japan.

From *Kokusaika* (internationalisation) to *Gurōbarizēshon* (globalisation)

In 1983, the government of Japan launched a policy for the internationalisation of Japanese higher education, announcing its plan to attract 100,000 international students (Ota, 2003). This plan was achieved in 2003 (MEXT, 2004), with Japan attracting students predominantly from China. Under this policy, international students coming to Japan mainly studied through Japanese as degree-seeking students. During this time, the buzzwords *kokusaika* (internationalisation) and *kokusai-jin* (international

person) became widespread in education, business and government (Macadam, 1987), with *kokusaika* having a positive image (Howe, 2009).

While *kokusaika* alludes to an image of greater internationalisation, that is, 'multicultural' understanding, 'one notable aspect of *kokusaika* is its preoccupation with Western nations, particularly the USA, and its promotion of nationalistic values in educational contexts' (Kubota, 2002: 16). Such governmental policy was built on promoting the acquisition and communication of a foreign language, English. Therefore, while higher education policy often refers to learning a foreign language or learning through a foreign language, indicating a more plural-linguistic approach, English is generally the most prominent language in Japanese HEI.

At the turn of the century, the buzzwords *kokusaika* and *kokusai-jin* were replaced by *gurōbarizēshon* (globalisation) and *gurōbaru jinzai* (global people, talent or human resource). Facing long-term economic stagnation and a falling birth rate, the Japanese government recognised the need for Japan to intensify its global competitiveness (Hoshi and Kashyap, 2004). To develop global human resources to play an active role on an international stage, Japanese education policy has undergone considerable reform, with a key goal being to attract more international students. Amid such processes, Japanese governmental policy has emerged, with an emphasis on *gurōbarizēshon* and *gurōbaru jinzai* to cultivate intercultural awareness or communicative competence to manage diversity.

In 2007, MEXT declared its goal to attract 300,000 international students by 2020 in collaboration with six other ministries, outlining five objectives. These are:

1. Develop international students' interest in Japan
2. Facilitate and improve the procedure for studying in Japan
3. Support the internationalisation of HEIs in Japan
4. Create an appropriate environment for accepting international students
5. Promote the acceptance of international students' post-graduation, especially in seeking employment opportunities. (MEXT, 2008)

The quantitative goal of attracting 300,000 international students was met in May 2019 after the residency status for college and pre-college students were combined, giving the policy an overnight boost of 83,811 students (Rees, 2022). However, the number of international students dropped under Japan's entry ban due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As of May 2022, 231,146 international students were studying in Japan, a 4.7 per cent decrease from 2021 (JASSO, 2022a). In June 2022, the Japanese government and MEXT set 2027 as a recovery goal for the 300,000 International Students Plan (Osumi, 2022). The following section briefly addresses some of Japan's significant reforms regarding internationalisation and globalisation.

Education reform to realise internationalisation

MEXT has launched several initiatives to promote internationalisation. These include the Global 30 Project (G30), Re-inventing Japan, Go Global Japan Project and the Top Global University Project (TGUP) (Rose and McKinley, 2018). This section provides more information on the G30 and TGUP, which focus on increasing the number of international students in Japan's HEIs.

The G30 project was launched in 2009, designating 13 hub universities (7 national and 6 private universities) as centres for government funding to establish and expand EMI courses and ETPs. One notable difference between this policy and previous initiatives to attract international students was that Japanese proficiency was not essential, nor were international students required to pass a specific Japanese-language proficiency to graduate. This policy change opened the international student pool significantly, with Japanese proficiency previously being a benchmark for studying in Japan. In this way, the G30 policy was concerned with providing opportunities for more international students to study in English in Japan. It did not actively attempt to include Japanese students in ETPs. Instead, Japanese student inclusion in ETPs was positioned as providing international students with an opportunity to 'learn about Japanese language and culture' (Burgess et al., 2010: 468). This resulted in few opportunities for international students and Japanese students to communicate and learn together, as both groups were separated. This has been compared to the '*dejima*-isation of the university' (Burgess et al., 2010). (The word *Dejima* comes from the Edo period when Japan closed its borders, trading only with the Dutch on the artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki – see Burgess et al. [2010] for more information on the notion of *Dejima*.) This essentially goes against MEXT's policy and efforts to internationalise its campuses. Instead,

it reinforces segregation – that specific students belong in particular programmes – which could lead to international students feeling marginalised, and that they exist on the periphery of the university.

In 2014, with the G30 funding ending, MEXT launched the TGUP, choosing 37 universities to receive funding to lead internationalisation efforts. Under the TGUP, 13 universities were selected as Type A (Top Type) and 24 as Type B (Global Traction Type). The goals under the TGUP are seen as a more 'cumulative effort' to bring Japan's internationalisation policies together (Rose and McKinley, 2018). This is because the TGUP policy strives to increase the number of international students in Japanese HEIs, and to raise the number of Japanese students who are experiencing study abroad. It further fosters goals relating to diversifying faculty, establishing more inter-university agreements and increasing the number of degree courses offered in a foreign language (MEXT, n.d.). In this way, a more concerted effort is made with the TGUP to include all stakeholders in the internationalisation of HEIs. It is shifting from something that only exists on the side of some faculties to something that belongs to the university. With the TGUP funding, the number of EMI courses and ETPs in Japan has grown considerably. It is estimated that over 30 universities offer degree-seeking undergraduate programmes, and around 70 universities graduate ETPs (Bradford and Brown, 2018: xviii). Several studies have examined the EMI classroom, especially the EMI curriculum, pedagogical approaches and assessment (Bradford, 2015; Bradford and Brown, 2018; Galloway et al., 2020; Tsuneyoshi, 2005). Many studies have identified the need for more support to guarantee the quality of teaching and learning in EMI classrooms (Galloway et al., 2020). However, little research exists on international students' satisfaction or experiences of internationalisation outside the classroom and the support offered to students outside their studies.

Smith (2004) notes that international students in EMI programmes face issues with cultural integration in multicultural settings and ideological issues concerning cultural identity. Heigham (2018: 161) also notes that international students often struggle with 'feelings of isolation and marginalisation'. While the TGUP policy positions itself as more inclusive, in reality several EMI courses and ETPs remain isolated, housed only in certain faculties or departments. As a result, international students often manage by forming groups based on language proficiency or ethnicity (Kunioshi and Nakakoji, 2018). While one of the objectives of internationalising higher education campuses in Japan is to internationalise at home (Galloway and Rose, 2015), integrating international students into the Japanese higher education campus remains challenging. To respond to this diversification, higher education policy in Japan must acknowledge the interconnections of local and global influences manifested in student identities, informing dialogic conversations inside and outside the classroom to understand international students' needs.

Consideration for sociocultural integration seems to be a by-product of *kokusaika* as an economic activity. Consequently, little attention is paid to the integration of international students and the obstacles they encounter (Ward et al., 2009). Internationalisation policies, such as the G30 and the TGUP, lack a focus on managing the integration of international students, and they do not address steps to promote the acceptance of international students in broader society. As noted by Kwon (2022), the retention and settlement of international students in Japan post-education remains questionable, due to linguistic and cultural barriers. However, as stated previously, the social integration of international students is a critical objective of MEXT's (2008) 300,000 International Students Plan policy. Thus, it should not be overlooked when discussing how higher education internationalisation can move beyond policy rhetoric.

Research shows that a 'loss and lack of social support … [leads] to lower academic achievement' (Owens and Loomes, 2010: 279) and various forms of stress (Centre, 2010). Such issues can lead to overall dissatisfaction with the student experience. Inadequately managing these issues may result in international students returning to their home countries with 'stories of isolation, misery and discontent' (Howe, 2009: 388). Yet, more often than not, the support offered to international students outside the classroom or university is informal, with many relying on friendships to establish their lives or to overcome challenges. Heigham (2018: 163) argues that universities need to 'develop awareness of the international students' experiences', while Howe (2009) and Rees (2022) call for increased scrutiny of the quality of internationalisation, as opposed to the quantity of international students. In Japan, many international students are seen as temporary (Hall, 1998), and they are frequently an 'invisible and unheard component of internationalisation programs' (Bradford and Brown, 2018: xxi). As such, there is often a lack of practical internationalisation policies beyond recruiting students (Howe, 2009). This opposes MEXT's (2008) policy to retain international students. Thus, this study aims to highlight international students'

experiences outside the classroom to develop a conversation on the support and infrastructure required to address international students' needs.

Methods

This section outlines the research context, the rationale for this study, methodological approaches and research procedures undertaken. The study adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on my ontological belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). As several macro and micro factors influence individuals, it is possible to have 'multiple interpretations of, and perspectives on, single events and situations' (Cohen et al., 2011: 15). In researching multi-lingua-cultural individuals in a new social environment, each brings their own ontological and epistemological beliefs. To construct a narrative of their experience, developing a conversation with research participants is necessary to generate knowledge.

Participants and research context

Participants for this study were sought using a Google Forms sign-up sheet sent through a mailing list of overseas students at the case university. I asked those willing to participate to provide basic information about themselves using Google Forms and state their availability for an interview. Six students were interviewed. The profile of each participant is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant profiles

Respondent	Age	Country	Track
Respondent 1 (R1)	27 years old	South Africa	African Business Education Initiative
Respondent 2 (R2)	24 years old	South Africa	African Business Education Initiative
Respondent 3 (R3)	33 years old	Egypt	African Business Education Initiative
Respondent 4 (R4)	25 years old	Hong Kong	Regular (self-funded)
Respondent 5 (R5)	27 years old	Germany	Regular (self-funded)
Respondent 6 (R6)	28 years old	Denmark	Regular (self-funded)

This study took place in one of Japan's Type B (Global Traction Type) TGUP universities, hereafter known as University A. All participants were studying in a graduate ETP, and they came from various countries and admission tracks. Around 30–35 per cent of the students in each intake year are Japanese. This makes the ETP relatively unusual, as most ETPs in Japan tend to have few Japanese students (Burgess et al., 2010). Table 2 shows the intake of students via the different admission tracks.

Table 2. Student intake by track

Year	Regular general intake (self-funded)	5 Year Programme: undergraduate and master's (fee-paying students)	International Double-degree (IDD) (tuition paid to the home university)	African Business Education (ABE) (JICA[*] funding)	Japanese Grant Aid (JDS) for Asia (JICA[*] funding)	Embassy Referral (home government funding)	MEXT (MEXT funding)	Total
2011	3	0	0	–	–	0	0	3
2012	5	3	0	–	–	1	0	9
2013	8	4	0	–	–	0	0	12
2014	2	0	0	3	–	3	0	8
2015	11	6	2	1	–	0	1	21
2016	7	5	3	5	2	1	0	23
2017	6	4	3	4	2	1	0	20
2018	9	12	5	1	2	0	1	30
2019	5	12	8	1	2	0	0	28
2020	5	5	6	8	0	0	0	24
2021	6	6	6	5	0	0	0	23

Note: * Japan International Cooperation Agency

As of 2021, 37 nationalities have studied in this graduate programme, with around 20–30 students admitted to the master's programme each academic year.

Data collection, ethical considerations, reliability and validity

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, and participants were asked many follow-up questions to expand on their experience or to give an example. This allowed a deeper understanding of the participants' narratives and enhanced the reliability of the data, as examples provided further context. All participant interviews were conducted in English and recorded using an IC recorder to ensure internal validity. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns in the data.

Ethical approval to conduct research was sought from University A. Furthermore, British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines were followed to ensure procedures did not harm any research participants. Following an explanation of the study, participants were asked to sign a consent form and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. When collecting, recording and transcribing data, all participant information was kept confidential, with no information being disclosed that could identify individuals. Participants were also asked to check transcriptions once complete to ensure that they were not misrepresented.

Regarding external validity, the findings have some limitations due to the scale of the exploratory study, which focuses on one university. To further generalise the experiences and perceptions of international students, it is necessary to interview more degree-seeking students from graduate and undergraduate programmes and expand the study to different HEIs.

Findings

Research findings show that international students have several non-academic needs that differ from home student needs. These relate to logistical support, linguistic barriers and social integration on and off the university campus. All participants expressed difficulty communicating in Japanese, except for R4, who had N1 on the Japanese language proficiency test (native-level proficiency).

Logistical support

Students discussed logistical support under two key ideas: the need for more support with administrative campus-wide tasks and logistical support to establish their lives in Japan. In terms of university administration, R6 stated: 'When they send out emails, 90 per cent of the email you receive is in Japanese, so half the time, you don't know what's going on. It's the same with the newsletter. All of it's in Japanese. It could be a bit more internationally friendly.' R5, who considers herself to have intermediate-level Japanese, notes experiencing difficulties with administration: 'I always tried to ask them in Japanese, but they replied very fast, so I couldn't understand half of it.' Others pointed out that if there is an English speaker in the office, it is often only one person, meaning that if that person is not there, they cannot communicate.

Beyond the university campus, all students noted a lack of support to establish their lives in Japan, citing challenges in finding somewhere to live, setting up and paying bills and enrolling on the healthcare system. R2 noted: 'There is little guidelines. You have to find out from your *sempai* [elders].' R3 mentioned difficulty finding reasonably priced furniture for her apartment, which resulted in her sleeping on the floor for three days until a *sempai* helped her find a second-hand store within her budget. The same respondent expressed difficulty finding suitable food: 'Because of my religion, halal food is difficult to find' (R3).

Most international students noted that this support network generally came from other international students who had arrived before them. However, one participant noted they were 'lucky', as some Japanese students in the ETP were supportive and willing to assist him with translation and accessing information to help establish his life. Participants noted that such logistical issues often arose from linguistic barriers, which rendered them illiterate and reliant on others. The following section further discusses linguistic issues.

Linguistic barriers

All students had a positive disposition towards learning Japanese. Even though international students wanted to pursue their Japanese study, it was not always possible. To attend a Japanese class, it was necessary to participate in four different types of classes, as each was interlinked. R1, R2 and R3 took beginner-level classes scheduled in the mornings. However, intermediate and advanced-level classes were scheduled in the afternoon. This made it impossible for R4, R5 and R6 to take Japanese-language courses as they conflicted with their graduate content courses. R5 and R6 were very disappointed with this schedule clash, as they felt it was difficult to progress alone, and too expensive to take additional language classes outside school. R5 stated:

> It's quite sad because they actually say you can learn Japanese at school, but you don't actually. It doesn't fit with your schedule. Also, the only people that I know that got a job in Japan after graduation from this master's programme are those that have Japanese-language ability beyond N2 [upper intermediate to advanced]. Everyone else went back to their home countries because they couldn't find a job in Japan.

R5 and R6 also mentioned that other international students in the master's programme could not take the language classes. This was not an issue for only a few students. They stated that many found it 'disappointing' as it did not 'help' them to be able to stay in Japan after graduation, which was a goal for many.

Participants also cited linguistic barriers in accessing information about university-wide events, with 'all' information being in Japanese. R1 and R2 mentioned that they often found out about events afterwards. R2 expressed his frustration about this and stated: 'There are events I want to know about. I dunno where to sign up … they send us emails in Japanese. They should send English emails too. There was a TED Talk event, I would have really liked to go.' This lack of information in English was noted by all participants apart from R4 when discussing the careers centre or information sent out by the university about job fairs. International students found the university particularly unsupportive when seeking employment, with Japanese-language proficiency being the main obstacle to accessing information on campus.

Social integration

R1, R2, R5 and R6 reveal their disappointment with social integration or building relationships with others outside their course. While everyone agreed that they felt they belonged or felt a sense of integration with international students and Japanese students in the master's programme, the same was not true outside the programme, especially regarding the broader university campus. R1 and R6 specifically expressed their interest in joining university sports clubs and the university festival, but they found that all the information was in Japanese, thus 'unwelcoming to international students' (R6). While R1 recognised that 'it would be nice to get involved', he saw this environment as 'inaccessible', as they would need someone to 'accommodate' them in English. R1 stated:

> If they could create more ways for us to be involved, it could help international students feel more involved and a part of [University A]. Instead of, I'm here to study in Japan and go back to my own country. I think they can offer more of a platform for students to do that.

Issues with social integration also transpired outside the university campus, with R1 and R2 particularly feeling undertones of discrimination, which they considered to be connected with their country of origin and skin colour. For example, R2 experienced difficulties finding an apartment. He stated: 'A lot of the Japanese people don't accept foreigners, and especially foreigners from Africa. It makes finding an apartment very difficult … the estate agent called me and was, like, our application is declined. We need to look for a new apartment' (R2).

Issues of exclusion and discrimination in broader society seemed to resonate with all students to varying extents. R4 stated: 'I tried to fit into the culture, to be Japanese, but you can never be Japanese, so now for me, I want to be a foreigner that understands and respects Japanese culture while maintaining my own identity.'

R6 discussed her feelings of exclusion and trying to fit in, stating that she would like to stay in Japan after graduation but feels pessimistic about working in Japan. She stated: 'If you don't feel the university

is accepting of you, then what will it be like at a company? So, that's why I'm interested in a start-up. The language, being able to speak Japanese, is definitely beneficial, and potentially harming if you can't' (R6).

R5 pointed out the conflict between policy for promoting internationalisation and what she thinks society really feels. She states: 'They [Japanese government] want to become open and international, promoting the international students coming in, but, at the same time, like … Japanese, they don't really want that.' The following section discusses these findings under the research questions outlined for this study.

Discussion

This study reveals a reoccurring and overarching theme regarding international students' perceptions and experiences of internationalisation in Japan, the sociocultural inclusion and exclusion of international students and linguistic issues.

How is Japan meeting its internationalisation policy goals in HEIs?

As outlined earlier, MEXT's (2008) 300,000 International Students Plan outlines five objectives for internationalising its HEIs:

1. Develop international students' interest in Japan
2. Facilitate and improve the procedure for studying in Japan
3. Support the internationalisation of HEIs in Japan
4. Create an appropriate environment for accepting international students
5. Promote the acceptance of international students' post-graduation, especially in seeking employment opportunities.

In terms of Japan meeting its internationalisation policy goals, participants in this study expressed their interest in Japan, clearly articulating why they chose Japan as a study-abroad destination. They also showed interest in learning Japanese, and they were disappointed when unable to. This study shows that students have various options or routes for studying in Japan, including access to several funding initiatives. In this sense, it can be argued that MEXT is meeting Objectives 1 and 2 of its policy. However, when reflecting on Objectives 3, 4 and 5, it is not as successful when looking at participants' experiences and comments. All participants mentioned inadequate support, especially for establishing their lives in Japan. Three participants pointed out that there are insufficient systems in place to include international students on campus. This resulted in international students not feeling that they belonged to the broader campus, and not being able to participate in clubs and circles or join university events. Language was predominantly seen as a barrier to accessing such groups. Likewise, due to the conflicting schedules of content classes and Japanese-language classes, international students could not study Japanese post-intermediate level. International students seeking to stay in Japan post-university saw this as a hurdle to developing their language skills and securing employment. As mentioned by R5, it is generally necessary to have N2 on the Japanese test to find a job in Japan. In a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, a lack of linguistic skills was ranked at the top (54.4 per cent) as a challenge for international students when job hunting (JASSO, 2024). These issues demonstrate a mismatch between MEXT's 2008 policy and support for international students on a practical level.

As Japan faces a population deficit in young people, more universities are turning towards internationalisation, establishing EMI and ETPs as a strategy to sustain themselves. As a result, more international students are coming to Japan with little Japanese proficiency, yet Japanese is the dominant language outside their faculty and classroom. EF Education First (2023) ranked Japan's English proficiency 87 out of 113 countries, ranking Japan under the low proficiency band of their index. This indicates that most of the population may not be capable of communicating with international students, who often rely on English as a medium of communication while studying in Japan. For MEXT to meet its policy objectives as it encourages HEIs to set up EMI and ETPs, it must encourage HEIs to look beyond the classroom. With MEXT, universities must invest in infrastructure to manage this new student demographic. It is also necessary to work with 'other governmental agencies in promoting intercultural awareness and acceptance not only within, but also beyond the boundaries of university campuses' (Rivers, 2010: 452). Realising internationalisation policy goals through EMI and ETPs will be challenging, if such steps are not taken.

What are international students' perceptions and experiences of higher education internationalisation in Japan?

International students in University A feel included or a 'part of' their ETP, and they find the environment beneficial for developing intercultural and communication skills for expanding their future employability. In this sense, it seems that the programme meets the internationalisation policy goals outlined by MEXT, and nurtures global human resources. However, research findings show that the broader campus and society are less inclusive or accepting of international students. This indicates that a gap exists between the faculty, the university and society in implementing MEXT policies for internationalisation.

The *dejima*-isation of internationalisation initiatives does not work, as international students exist beyond their ETP and faculty. International students should be able to access and use the services and facilities offered by the university. However, all participants, except for one, mentioned their struggles in completing administrative tasks and accessing information, citing linguistic proficiency, with the dissemination of information being focused on 'native' Japanese students. Nevertheless, most HEIs require no Japanese ability when accepting international students to study in Japan. If this is the case, the linguistic capabilities of international students should be accounted for, with strategies and procedures in place to assist them. The research sample in this study all point out their inability to experience university life fully, feeling that they existed on the periphery.

Many international students relied on informal networks outside the university for support and guidance. Yet several international students cited common challenges in establishing and managing their lives, such as renting a flat, buying a phone, setting up a bank account or enrolling in the healthcare system. Many reported that *senpai* (elder) international students helped them negotiate these things, and several noted that they felt exhausted or stressed due to insufficient Japanese-language ability to get tasks done. Two participants also experienced discrimination, one from a neighbour and another in a social setting. Neither of them reported the incident to the university or international centre, and R2 stated, 'I don't think they can do anything'. When probed about why they felt this way, R2 responded, 'We don't really know who to tell, and I don't think they think it's their job to help us.' Such perspectives may arise from the ad-hoc internationalisation support systems in Japan. Faculty working within internationalisation often take on extra responsibility, but not in a formal role. To enhance the management of internationalisation, a more unified approach is necessary. At the same time, 'faculty development and staff training sessions are crucial to teach and administer EMI programs' (Birchley, 2018: 133). Investing more in the management and leadership of EMI and ETPs can enhance and improve international students' experience and satisfaction, as it demonstrates a sense of responsibility or care for international students. Likewise, MEXT's internationalisation objectives under the 300,000 International Students Plan can also be better accomplished through enhancing the management of programmes.

The idea of international students as short-term guests must shift, if the goal is to retain talented international students. All participants raised the issue of not entirely feeling accepted on and off campus. R4 mentioned that although he was Asian and fluent in Japanese, he still could not 'fit in'. R5 pointed out the dichotomy of Japanese society 'wanting to be open and international, but not wanting that', while R6 reconsidered her plan to seek employment in Japan, indicating that being accepted would be more challenging in the workplace. A JASSO (2022b) survey conducted on international students' job hunting shows that one of the key reasons that companies seek to hire international students is to increase diversity in the workplace. The same survey also revealed that 90 per cent of companies expect international students to have N1-level proficiency when hiring (JASSO, 2022b). While many international students would like to work in Japan after graduation, in reality, 'it is not easy for international students to find employment in Japan' (JASSO, 2022b: 8). It is necessary to address the discrepancy between policy, how universities manage international students, and the expectations of companies. MEXT must work with stakeholders to promote intercultural competencies in broader society. Likewise, universities need to establish better systems for assisting international students with job hunting, and to ensure they have access to Japanese-language classes.

Conclusion

This study examines the experiences of degree-seeking international students studying in an ETP at a private university in Japan. It seeks to understand how international students experience and perceive internationalisation. Analysis of the participants' responses shows that socio-lingua-cultural

challenges are common issues for integrating international students on and off campus. Research shows that international students 'desire' contact with 'host nationals in both academic and social settings' (Ward et al., 2009: 80). However, there tends to be little focus on initiatives to promote intercultural opportunities outside the classroom. Japan's internationalisation policies currently focus on initiatives to attract international students to Japan or to provide funding for study in Japan. A more significant effort must be made to bring all stakeholders together to focus more on the acceptance, assimilation and retention of international students, as 'students' sense of belonging … [is] strongly associated with their sense of social acceptance' (Yao, 2015: 8–9). For Japan to meet its quantitative goal of 400,000 international students by 2033, it is necessary to reflect on how international students view higher education internationalisation in Japan to qualitatively improve policy initiatives, which can help to develop a conceptual framework to respond to international students' needs.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with British Educational Research Association standards.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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