

The Presence and Absence of Immigration Policy of International Student Migration to Japan: A Critical Review of Japan's Recent Liberalisation of Highly Skilled and Skilled Migration Policies

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Since 2004, when the “big bang reforms” were enacted on Japanese higher education, Japanese universities have been increasingly focused on the task of “internationalizing”. While somewhat of a buzzword in a sense, the concept is having a significant influence on the entirety of the higher education industry in the country as an influx of international students has been accelerated under such a process.

Amid the change and development that the internationalization of higher education (IHE) in Japan has brought, there have been many studies carried out on the topic that have sought to question the meaning and investigate the impact of internationalization for and on Japanese higher education. The answers these studies have provided are both polemical and rounded. However, the immigration, or “the permanent settlement of international students”, aspect is one part that is consistently overlooked in reviewing and evaluating the process of IHE in Japan. Although it is clear that the Japanese government and Higher Education Institutions are continuously eager to lure more international students, no specific linkage between the recruitment of international students and their settlement in the society as permanent residents and potential citizens has been commented on.

This point makes a significant difference between Japan and most other industrially advanced countries in terms of how to view international student mobility (ISM). In most industrially advanced countries ISM comes under the purview of highly skilled migration. Since international students are considered an important human capital and potential skilled and highly skilled migrants for enhancing competitiveness of the economy, many countries strive to attract the best students in order to incorporate them into their domestic labor market after graduation. Hence, they are encouraged to become more long-term, permanent residents, and potential citizens from the point of entry into the national migration policy framework.

In the case of Japan, in principle, policies towards international students also fall under the highly skilled migration policy umbrella implemented by the government with slogans such as – ‘race for talent’ and ‘battle for the brains’ commonly used. However, in reality international students seem to be largely viewed as nothing more than temporary sojourners and temporary laborers, often described in government rhetoric as transnational bridge-builders, which may implicitly convey a message of - “welcome now

but please go back home later”.

Against this backdrop, this study critically reviews the Japanese government’s recent liberalization of migration policies towards highly skilled and skilled foreign workers. Previous studies of Japan’s highly skilled and skilled migration policies often attempt to address various factors that hinder the recruitment of highly skilled migrants, and reasons why Japan needs more liberal policies to recruit, and retain more skilled foreign workers.

Unlike most studies of the issue, this study critically investigates the migration policy issues through the lens of international student migration. Although international students often do not fit definitions of highly skilled migration, student mobility and highly skilled migration show striking similarities and share many characteristics. This is particularly so in the case of Japan where highly skilled/skilled migration policies and policies on international students and IHE share many commonalities. By questioning preconceived notions and established knowledge on the topic of international student migration in Japan, this paper seeks to dispel the perceived ambiguity, superficiality and contradictions of Japan’s current highly skilled and skilled migration policies and advances debate on immigration discourses in the society. Ultimately, this study will attempt to answer the two questions of: why in Japan, is mass immigration still a very radical topic, which has not been openly discussed, in Japanese politics, and why is the government and Japanese society reluctant to discuss the issue in a public way in order to deal with the serious demographic problems the country faces?

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