

**Title:**

**The Other Side of Migrant Integration:  
How does ‘mutual adaptation’ actually work?**

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**Abstract**

1. Background

As Japan moves toward an era of more open acceptance of foreign labor, migrant integration is becoming an increasingly important topic among both policymakers and scholars. The government has announced the long-awaited abolishment of the technical intern trainee system, the de facto unskilled labor supply system for small-to-medium size enterprises struggling to secure Japanese workers. The system that will eventually take its place will aim to protect the rights of foreign workers, allowing them to change jobs, extend their stay, and eventually apply for permanent residency together with family members (Benoza, 2024). More foreign workers means more foreign residents and a greater need to understand how to accommodate and adapt to increasingly multicultural workplaces and communities. In the absence of specific policies from the national government on how to integrate larger numbers of foreign residents (Kim & Streich, 2020), local governments are developing their own policies and initiatives, predominantly on an ad hoc basis, to address the needs of changing community populations. However, despite such progress, there are indications that integration initiatives to date are generally ‘service-based’ rather than ‘integrative’ (Nagy qtd. in Green, 2021; p.406).

A common understanding amongst migration scholars is that migrant integration requires adaptation and adjustment not only by migrants themselves, but also by the receiving society (Klarenbeek, 2021; OECD/European Commission, 2023). While migrants are expected to learn the language, understand the customs, and obey the laws of the host society, scholars state that work also needs to be done by the members of the host society themselves to ensure that migrants are able to live and work in a manner equivalent to the native members of the society. This is posited as a two-way process of ‘mutual adjustment’ (Klarenbeek, 2024; p.246). Here I would like to suggest that a more appropriate

term might be ‘mutual adaptation’, which implies longer-term and more far-reaching changes than ‘adjustment’ might entail. In any case it is clear that such mutual change presupposes certain expectations of the host society: an awareness of the need to change as the country accepts more migrants; knowledge of migrants’ needs and challenges; and openness to new and different cultural norms and practices. Japan has traditionally not accepted large numbers of migrants, and there has been relatively limited contact with foreign residents. As the foreign population grows, research on intercultural relations and public attitudes toward migrants and their integration into Japanese society is essential.

## 2. Overview of research

This research looks at the issue of ‘mutual adaptation’ and poses the questions: what should such adaptation entail, in practical terms, for the host society? How is integration understood at the community level in Japan? And how willing are host society members to make changes to accommodate more diverse members into Japanese society? This paper reports on field work conducted in the Kansai region of Japan with the aim of exploring community-level understanding of migrant integration. Studies on Japanese community attitudes toward migrants to date have mainly centered on large-scale quantitative surveys that analyze responses to one or two questions on whether respondents agree with accepting more migrants and whether or not they have foreign friends (Korekawa, 2019; Kosaki & Sato, 2019; Nagayoshi, 2021). In contrast, the current study uses qualitative methods to offer a more nuanced view of expectations and responses of the Japanese public toward foreign members of their communities. In fieldwork from April 2023 to February 2024, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following groups: (1) Japanese employers and workers; (2) foreign workers; (3) local government officers; (4) employees of local organizations; (5) Japanese members of a community with foreign residents. Interviews were analyzed with three aims: to explore community-level interpretations of migrant integration; to understand factors that may promote and inhibit ‘mutual adaptation’; and to identify potential opportunities for higher education institutions to offer support for communities facing the challenges of receiving larger numbers of foreign residents.

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