

Universities as migration intermediaries: the case of linguistic support and social integration of international faculty in Japan

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Universities are increasingly recognised as intermediary organisations that support and control the international migration of students, faculty, and their dependents. Mobility in higher education continues to increase worldwide and mobility pathways are becoming more diverse, making the attraction and retention of international scholars and students a growing concern in both national labour strategies and universities' institutional policy. Thus, understanding the nature of this mobility and processes of incorporation is crucial. Japan is no exception with the higher education system in Japan hosting an ever growing international community. At the end of 2024, the ~3.5 million foreign residents in Japan comprised ~3% of the population, a substantial increase in comparison to prior statistics (MOJ, 2025). Considering the size of this population and their growing proportional representation within Japanese society, the effective incorporation of this community will be critical to the nation's future prosperity and social cohesion (Liu-Farrer, 2020; Strausz, 2025). Universities play a critical role in this process of incorporation. Around 10% of these residents (336,708) are international students (JASSO, 2025), while a further ~21,000 international faculty teach in Japanese universities (MEXT, 2023). Thus, Japanese universities function as "migration intermediaries," attracting overseas talent to Japan as international students and scholars and potentially aiding their adaptation to Japanese cultural norms (Brotherhood, 2025). Nevertheless, the low retention of both faculty and students is a growing concern of both the government (JSPS, 2025; Kotake, 2024) and institutional policy (Chen, 2024; Chen & Chen, 2023), as institutions seek to better incorporate and retain these international communities.

In this context, the present study seeks to explore the role of linguistic support in the broader social integration of international faculty members in Japan, under the guiding logic that greater social integration increases retention. This mixed-methods study began with a quantitative survey of full-time international faculty members in Japanese universities ($n = 181$). In line with earlier findings, local language ability is comfortably the strongest predictor of integration, with motivation to study the local language being the second strongest predictor. A novel finding of the survey is that higher levels of linguistic support in host universities, as quantified by a validated questionnaire known as the ISS-10 (Patterson & Brotherhood, 2024) was also a strong predictor of greater social integration. Further significant predictors of social integration include tenure status and national origin, specifically being from a Western nation. To expand on these findings, the second phase of the study entailed semi-structured follow-up interviews with survey respondents ($n = 22$). These interviews revealed widespread frustration with the lack of local language support for international faculty, with the preference being for a firefighting approach that prioritises quick fixes for administrative issues over a long-term capacity-building approach to linguistic support. This

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indicates that capitalising on universities' institutional strength and making renewed investments in Japanese language training as an element of a broader faculty development/incorporation program may enhance social integration and retention.

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