

# **Rethinking Student Migration Policies in Japan as a Non-Immigration Country in the Context of Aging Society and Immigration**

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As the world's third largest economy, Japan is continuously one of the most popular destination countries for migrant workers and students in Asia. With its birth rate among the world's lowest, the country faces the problems of aging society, shrinking labor force and declining productivity. Although allowing mass immigration would be the fastest and easiest way to tackle its economic and demographic problems, the government is not likely to use this as a solution. Although the country has been adopting various policy in responses both to the shortage of labor and the growing ethno-cultural diversity produced by migration, it has continuously maintained restrictive attitude toward immigration.

Despite the attempts by the government to avoid mass immigration as a solution, it has tried recently to more attract skilled migrants through a newly modified technical intern program, and foreign laborers in certain sectors such as housekeeping support and nursing care. More notably it has also strived to lure more highly skilled foreign professionals, using a new points-based system. However, the policy measures continue to underperform and there has been much criticism of government initiatives to attract global talent (Oishi, 2014). Moreover, as in many other high-income countries, the Japanese government is also using the internationalization of higher education as a way of stimulating skilled migration, by attracting foreign students as a source of labor, and as part of highly skilled migration policies. In recent years, therefore, the Japanese government has attempted to promote the internationalization of higher education through schemes such as the 'Global 30' initiative in order to enhance the country's global competitiveness and revitalize the economy. In this case, the increase in the number of international students has been substantial, but a relatively low percentage of international students stay on to find employment after graduation. This is mainly due to unfavorable social and political climates toward immigration in general, which is partly linked to the absence of immigration politics in the society.

In Japan, the link between student movement and the recruitment of skilled workers is not yet as strong as in other developed countries such as the U.S, Canada and Australia, where international students are seen as a valuable pool of talent for governments to tap into. In contrast, international students in Japan are usually considered temporary residents rather than future permanent residents or potential citizens, even though they have a huge potential to contribute not only economically but also socially and culturally to the host society in the long-term. It is therefore necessary for the Japanese government and society to rethink proactively and comprehensively the recruitment, retention, and settlement of international students in the center of immigration debates, and in the light

of the economic and socio-cultural benefits they can bring to Japan with its aging population.

Against this backdrop, examining reasons behind Japan's unwillingness toward immigration, this study critically reviews Japan's migration policy initiatives to utilize foreign laborers instead of formal immigration. Furthermore, this study rethinks student migration as an alternative to mass migration in the context of aging society and immigration. The result of this study may be to point to ways in which Japanese government may strategically reviews the recruitment, retention, and settlement of international students through both human capital and academic gate approach (Abella, 2006) and uses student migrants practically as a source of skilled workers to address its demographic and economic problems, as well as a means of enhancing regional integration and cooperation through the creation of a genuinely multicultural immigrant society.

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