

Impact of the Covid Pandemic on Asian Graduate Students in Japan: Lessons learned and future recommendations for student support

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Abstract. The Japanese government has recognized international students as the major force for internationalizing domestic universities and contributing to the domestic labor force. This study investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate-level international students from Asian countries studying in Japan. Employing a phenomenological research approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with international students regarding their experience studying in Japan during the pandemic and aims to illustrate the challenges they face in Japanese university and societal context. While students had diverse challenges depending on their financial situation, Japanese language knowledge, access to university, and support systems both on and off-campus, many of them showed resilience in overcoming these challenges and took advantage of the new situation for their own benefit.

Keywords: Asia, COVID-19 impact, Japan, phenomenological approach, support for international students

Introduction

The landscape of international student mobility (ISM) has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, prominently influenced by students from Asia who constitute over half of the world's internationally mobile student population. This demographic shift underscores the pivotal role of Asia in shaping the dynamics of global education and highlights the concerted efforts by governments and educational institutions to enhance their international appeal and diversity through ISM. Notably, Japan emerged as a leading destination for international students, achieving its ambitious target of hosting 300,000 international students by 2020, a year ahead of schedule, with a reported 312,214 international

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students in 2019 (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2020). This achievement reflects Japan's proactive strategies in internationalizing its higher education landscape.

However, the unforeseen advent of the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted ISM, compelling Japan to adjust its goals and strategies in response to the challenges faced by international students. The pandemic's impact extended beyond mere numbers, manifesting in the significant upheaval of students' lives due to stringent travel restrictions and public health measures. The subsequent decline to 219,214 international students in 2022 underscores the pandemic's disruptive influence on ISM and the immediate challenges it posed to students' well-being and academic pursuits (Amoah & Mok, 2020; JASSO, 2023).

In response, the Japanese government articulated a vision to not only rebuild these numbers to pre-pandemic levels by 2027 but also to ambitiously expand its international student intake to 400,000 by 2033, reflecting a commitment to reinforcing Japan's position as a global educational hub (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2023; Nikkei, 2023). In the Japanese context, students have lost jobs because of these restrictions, with vendors closing down (Sekiya, 2021) and finding new employment has become a daunting task (Suzuki & Yazaki, 2020). Many students have faced difficulties in receiving support due to language or cultural barriers (Kinoshita & Byreau, 2021). Furthermore, newly enrolled students were uncertain about their ability to travel to Japan, as the immigration services stopped granting student visas until March 2022.

This study intends to provide comprehensive insights into the experiences of Asian students in Japan during the pandemic and understand its effects on their educational journey. Additionally, the study aims to explore the coping strategies employed by students to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic. The focus on the COVID-19 outbreak remains relevant as understanding the experiences during this period can provide valuable lessons for future crises. The insights gained can inform policies and practices to better support international students, enhancing their academic and personal development in times of global disruptions.

Ultimately, the objective is to derive valuable implications from the students' firsthand experiences, with the aim of improving and strengthening support systems for international students in Japan. This research contributes to filling the identified gaps and offers evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educational institutions.

Literature Review

International student strategy in Japan

The Japanese government set its initial target in 1983, aiming to increase the number of international students to 100,000, with a primary focus on recruiting Japanese-speaking students. Subsequently, in 2008, a new target was introduced to reach 300,000 international students by 2020. This influx of

international students was expected to foster an internationalized environment, revitalize the economy, and enhance Japan's global competitiveness (Yonezawa, 2011).

To achieve this goal and attract highly talented students from around the world, various initiatives were implemented. Notable projects include the Global 30 Project (2009-2014) and the Top Global University Project (2014-2024), which aimed to create an appealing environment for international students. However, there has been a substantial emphasis on quantitative outputs rather than the quality of programs. Institutional strategies often focus on increasing student numbers, study abroad programs, and institutional agreements, while neglecting qualitative assessments of students' experiences or outcomes (Ishikawa, 2011; Yamamoto, 2018). Research on international student mobility in Japan frequently focuses on the achievements of studying abroad in Japan and provides insights for future policy formulation for the host and home countries (e.g. Enkhtur, 2019; Li & Ishikawa, 2019; Sato, 2021). Several studies discussed the experiences and challenges faced by international students, such as cultural adaptation, language barriers, academic support, social integration, and employment prospects after graduation (Huang, 2022; Ikeguchi, 2012; Lee, 2017; Simic-Yamashita & Tanaka, 2010; Tan, 2021).

For example, Ikeguchi (2012) highlighted that international students in Japan face challenges in making friends with Japanese students, feeling accepted in Japanese society, and dealing with the underpreparedness of Japanese host institutions. A lack of information available in English also compounds these difficulties (p. 176). Lee's (2017) ethnographic study further revealed that international students in Japan encounter perceived discrimination in finding housing and jobs, language struggles, and financial difficulties. Four major challenges were identified among international students: personal psychological issues, general living issues, sociocultural issues, and Japanese language issues. The study involved Vietnamese, Filipino, Brazilian, and Chinese students who faced difficulties such as homesickness, stress, and anxiety due to financial stress and cultural differences. The study highlighted various coping strategies, including support groups, positive attitudes, and interaction with Japanese friends, which helped students manage their challenges.

Tan (2021) discussed the challenges of cultural adaptation, language barriers, academic support, and social integration faced by international students in Japan. Similarly, the research emphasized the importance of providing adequate support systems and creating an inclusive environment to help students integrate better into Japanese society.

A recent statement from MEXT provides clarity on the future direction of international student policy in the post-pandemic period. This shift entails moving away from the previous emphasis on the quantity of admitted students, which primarily focused on the initial stage of international student exchange, to a perspective that places greater importance on the outcomes and results to enhance the overall quality of student acceptance. Moreover, Japan's policies regarding international students are closely linked to encouraging highly skilled foreign talents to continue working within Japan. Therefore, in the future, several support measures will be implemented to increase the proportion of international

students who secure employment in Japan, aiming to raise the current rate from 39.9% in 2020 to 50% by 2025 (MEXT, 2023). For instance, a certified program called the “International Student Employment Promotion Program” will be implemented to support initiatives where universities collaborate with local municipalities and industries (MEXT, 2023). This program aims to create an environment where international students can learn ‘business Japanese’, ‘career education’ (such as Japanese corporate culture) and engage in ‘mid-to-long-term internships’, all of which are essential skills for securing employment (MEXT, 2023).

International students’ experiences during the pandemic

After the outbreak of the pandemic, some educational institutions conducted surveys regarding the impact of the pandemic on international students’ studies and mobility (Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Quacquarelli Symonds, 2020). Additionally, some studies indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on international students, particularly in terms of their overall well-being, international travel restrictions, family life, academic activities, and scholarship opportunities (Kercher & Plasa, 2020; Mok et al., 2021). These studies shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by international students during this global crisis, highlighting the need for comprehensive support and innovative solutions to address the specific issues affecting their lives and educational journeys.

For example, Hastings and colleagues investigated the precarious employment and personal finances of international students in Australia before and during the pandemic. The study found that prior to COVID-19, many students were already living on low incomes, with 54% earning AU\$499 or less per week. The pandemic exacerbated financial stress, with significant income losses and high rates of job loss, particularly in sectors like hospitality, education, and retail. Students relied heavily on paid work, which was severely impacted by the pandemic, highlighting the vulnerability of international students to economic shocks (Hastings et al., 2023). Similarly, Hari and colleagues analyzed the experiences of international students in Canada during the pandemic through a transnational lens. They found that the pandemic heightened students’ reliance on support from transnational families and generated anxieties about future careers and mobilities. The study underscored the importance of considering international students’ lived experiences and the complex challenges they faced, which were often exacerbated by sudden border closures and travel restrictions (Hari et al., 2023).

While the earlier literature focused on primarily the detrimental effects of the pandemic on higher education, later studies found resilience, adaptability, and self-agency in overcoming the challenges created by the pandemic. Liu et al. (2022) explored how Asian international college students in the US experienced racism before and during the pandemic. Participants in their study reported regular exposure to racist acts and attitudes, which were exacerbated during the pandemic. Despite these challenges, students developed resilience through their life experiences and community support. The study

emphasized the strength and agency of Asian international students in counteracting racism and highlighted the need for policy improvements in U.S. higher educational institutions (Liu et al., 2022).

Cheng et al. (2024) examined the intersections between migration governance and higher education during the pandemic, focusing on postgraduate international students in Singapore and the UK. The comparative study found that pandemic governance often compounded the complexities of migration policies, creating additional barriers for international students. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resourcefulness and adaptability, drawing on various resources to cope with the pandemic's impact. The study emphasized the crucial role of higher education institutions in providing support and resources to mitigate these challenges (Cheng et al., 2024)

In Japan, the government implemented various measures to provide support for international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures included Special Cash Payments in 2020, reductions or exemptions in social security contributions, and deferments of utility charges to ease the financial burden. MEXT played a significant role by providing monetary support based on enrollment status and grade point average. Provincial and city governments offered coupons for purchasing goods, and universities provided food coupons, rented personal computers, Wi-Fi routers, online study hubs, and tuition waivers. However, these support measures were only accessible to those physically present in Japan, posing challenges for students unable to travel due to restrictions.

Kondo et al. (2020) conducted a questionnaire on the experiences of international students in Japan during the pandemic to assess the impact on international students. Several other studies have highlighted the significant impact of the pandemic on the mental health of international students in Japan. Brotherhood's (2023) research studied prospective international students affected by the border closure during the pandemic. His study highlights significant mental health challenges and the lack of support systems during crises for international students in Japan. The JapanTravelBan exacerbated these issues, leading to prolonged uncertainty and isolation for prospective international students (Brotherhood, 2023). Studies report increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among these students. These findings emphasize the lack of mental health support and awareness, which left students feeling isolated and unsupported (Chen et al., 2020; Suk et al., 2024; Teragishi et al. 2024). Xu (2024) underscored the persistence of anxiety among international students, noting that anxiety levels did not significantly decrease as the pandemic progressed. Huang (2024) specifically focuses on Chinese students, revealing similar trends of increased anxiety and depression.

Social isolation emerged as a recurring theme across the studies, highlighting the challenges students faced due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. Despite these difficulties, many students exhibited resilience by adapting to new situations and seeking support from peers and online communities (An & Berry, 2023; Murata, 2022).

Several studies examined individual cases from different universities and explored strategies to support international students. For example, they studied psychological challenges faced by international students, language learning difficulties, the transition to online education, and the

recruitment of international students (Chowdury et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Sato et al., 2022). The response from Japanese higher education institutions varied widely. Some universities implemented support measures, including financial aid, mental health services, and academic assistance. However, the effectiveness and accessibility of these measures were inconsistent, resulting in uneven support across different institutions (e.g. Huang, 2024).

Previous studies have mostly focused on specific aspects of the impact on international students, such as mental health issues and social isolation, or on students from specific countries, such as Chinese students, or on individual universities. Additionally, quantitative research was dominant, while qualitative studies that capture the voices of international students are relatively scarce. This study, however, focuses on the broader group of Asian students, particularly at the graduate level. It not only comprehensively examines the various impacts on these students but also explores how they navigate these challenges, ultimately providing recommendations for supporting international students.

The study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 on Asian graduate students in Japan by asking the following research questions:

- (1) How did Asian graduate students experience the pandemic in Japan, and how did it affect their learning?
- (2) How did students navigate the challenges?
- (3) What implications can we draw from students' experiences to better support international students in Japan?

The focus on Asian students is particularly justified given that they constitute a significant majority of the international student population in Japan. As of 2019, students from Asia made up 93.6% of all international students in Japan, with countries like China, Vietnam, and Nepal being the top contributors (JASSO, 2023). This demographic dominance means that the experiences and challenges faced by Asian students are highly representative of the broader international student body in Japan.

Moreover, Asian students often face unique challenges related to socioeconomic status, cultural adjustment, and linguistic barriers, which can be amplified during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding these specific experiences is crucial for developing targeted support systems that can effectively address their needs. By focusing on Asian students, this study aims to provide detailed insights that can benefit not only this demographic but also inform broader policies and practices that support all international students.

Focusing on graduate students is particularly important because they often experience different challenges compared to undergraduate students. Graduate students typically have greater academic and research responsibilities, and their educational journeys are more deeply integrated with their professional development. The disruption caused by the pandemic could have more significant implications for their future careers. Additionally, graduate students are more likely to be involved in research projects that require physical presence in labs or fieldwork, which were heavily impacted by

lockdowns and travel restrictions. Understanding the specific impact on this group can provide deeper insights into how to support academic and professional development during crises.

By drawing on the lived experiences of Asian graduate students, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the broader international student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and offers practical recommendations for improving support mechanisms in future crises.

Methodology

In this study, we employed a phenomenological research methodology, drawing from Creswell and Poth's (2016) framework, to gain an understanding of international students' lived experiences in Japan during COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological approach is particularly suitable for this study as it focuses on exploring and describing the lived experiences of individuals from their own perspectives. This aligns with our research questions and objectives, which aim to delve deeply into the personal and collective experiences of international students during a global health crisis, thereby capturing the essence of their experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them.

Using a snowball sampling method, we initially invited international students studying at leading national universities in Japan, who then referred us to other international students from other countries. After starting with five participants, we interviewed sixteen international students from six Asian countries or regions, China, Mongolia, India, Vietnam, Nepal, and Taiwan (See Table 1). The interviewees were mainly female students (5 male and 11 female) in different program levels (5 PhD students and 5 Masters) and majors (6 in STEM and 4 in Humanities and Social Sciences). Half of the participants had arrived in Japan before the COVID-19 pandemic, while the other half had arrived during the pandemic restrictions. The interviews were conducted in two time periods. Five interviews took place in August 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic was still severe. The international students shared the difficulties and challenges they were experiencing at that time. Additionally, another eleven interviews were conducted in January to February 2023, when the pandemic was nearing its end. The international students gained more insights into their overall experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and discussed how to overcome challenges and the change in their student lives during the pandemic.

The two-wave recruitment strategy was employed to capture a comprehensive picture of the international students' experiences at different stages of the pandemic. The first wave of interviews in

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

Interviewees (pseudonyms)	Home country/region	Age	Gender	Finance /Scholarship	Program level	Area of study	Family status	Japanese language
Arjun	India	27	Male	Full scholarship	Research student	Humanities	Single	Proficient
Khulan	Mongolia	28	Female	Full scholarship	PhD candidate	STEM	Lives with husband and a toddler	Lower intermediate
Nara	Mongolia	27	Female	Full scholarship	Masters	STEM	Single	Survival
Tuya	Mongolia	28	Female	Full scholarship	PhD Recent graduate	STEM	Single	Proficient
Amar	Mongolia	36	Female	Full scholarship	PhD Recent graduate	STEM	Lives with husband and one daughter	Proficient
Od	Mongolia	33	Female	Full scholarship	PhD candidate	Social science	Single	Survival
Anh	Vietnam	26	Female	Full scholarship	Masters	Social science	Single	Proficient
Linh	Vietnam	37	Female	Self-financed	PhD candidate	Humanities	Lives with husband and 2 young daughters	Proficient
Suman	Nepal	33	Male	Full scholarship	PhD Recent graduate	STEM	Single	Survival
Yuan	Taiwan	30	Male	Self-financed	Master Recent graduate	STEM	Single	Proficient
Zhao	China	28	Female	Self-financed	PhD Recent graduate	Humanities	Single	Proficient
Zhang	China	27	Male	Self-financed	PhD candidate	STEM	Single	Survival
Qin	China	25	Male	Self-financed	Masters	STEM	Single	Survival
Guo	China	28	Female	Self-financed	PhD candidate	STEM	Single	Survival
Jin	China	35	Female	Self-financed	PhD candidate	Humanities	Single	Proficient
Meng	China	40	Female	Self-financed	PhD Recent graduate	Social science	Lives with husband and 2 young sons	Proficient

August 2021 provided immediate insights into the acute challenges and adjustments students faced during the height of the pandemic. This timing allowed us to understand the initial impact and the real-time coping strategies students employed. The second wave of interviews in early 2023 was conducted to gather reflective insights as the pandemic situation improved; students had the opportunity to assess the long-term effects on their academic and personal lives. This approach enabled us to capture a longitudinal perspective on the evolving experiences and adaptive strategies of international students, thereby enhancing the methodological rigor and depth of our findings.

As researchers with firsthand experience as foreign faculties and former international students in Japan, the interviewers had insider knowledge that facilitated deeper conversations. Each researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, Mongolian, English, and Japanese, depending on the participants' language preferences. In total, 16 hours of interview data were collected. Following the interviews, the researchers gave pseudonyms to each interviewee, transcribed the data and shared it for analysis. NVivo software was used to manage and analyze the data.

Analytical Framework

In analyzing the challenges faced by international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, we modified the framework developed by Hu and Zhang (2013) to include a more comprehensive set of issues observed among Asian graduate students in Japan. This revised framework categorizes the challenges into five main areas: psychological well-being, academic adjustment, sociocultural integration, daily life challenges, and Japanese language proficiency (See Table 2). Each category encompasses specific problems identified through our research and interviews with students.

Table 2. Summary of challenges facing international students

No.	Category	Specific issues
1	Psychological well-being	Homesickness and isolation, stress and anxiety, mental health issues, etc.
2	Academic adjustment	Adaptation to online learning, access to resources, communication with faculty, etc.
3	Sociocultural integration	Cultural adaptation, social isolation, experience of discrimination, etc.
4	Daily life challenges	Accommodation issues, financial stress, health and safety concerns, etc.
5	Japanese language proficiency	Communication barriers, academic challenges, limited language support, etc.

This framework serves as a systematic tool for analyzing the experiences of Asian graduate students in Japan during the pandemic. It helps in identifying the specific challenges within each category and

understanding how these challenges are interrelated. By applying this framework, we aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors affecting international students and offer insights into how institutions can better support them. The framework also underscores the importance of a holistic approach in addressing the needs of international students, especially during global crises.

Findings

Psychological well-being and mental health challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant personal psychological challenges for international students, affecting their mental health and emotional well-being.

Arjun, who arrived in Japan for the first time from India, shared a harrowing experience:

As soon as I stepped off the airplane, I was diagnosed with COVID-19. I spent two weeks in a state of anxiety and loneliness, which affected me both physically and mentally. I thought I might die and die in a foreign country. I didn't dare tell my parents because I feared they would worry about me. I prayed to Allah every day for His blessing.

This account underscores the profound psychological and emotional challenges faced by international students during the pandemic, especially when dealing with illness in an unfamiliar environment.

Language barriers, exacerbated by the suspension of translation services and reduced social interactions, have heightened feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Khulan, a student from Mongolia, shared her experience of giving birth during the pandemic and the sudden discontinuation of hospital translation services. This left her with limited language skills and the need to rely on translation applications, which added to her feelings of fear and isolation.

The hospital translation services all stopped suddenly due to the pandemic. I gave birth in spring 2020, so by the time I was close to giving birth, the service stopped because they would no longer permit outside visitors to enter the hospital. So, I just used Google and other translation apps. It was very scary to go through this process alone with little language skills.

Academic adjustment and challenges

The academic experiences of international students during the pandemic were significantly affected, leading to setbacks in their research progress and overall learning quality. For example, delay in starting projects or research due to travel restrictions was a major hurdle. Arjun, an Indian student, shared the

difficulties he faced in taking online classes from India, where he had distractions at home, such as younger siblings interrupting his online classes. Additionally, he lacked access to necessary study materials, further hindering his ability to concentrate and engage in effective learning.

I had to take online classes from India, but it was very hard to concentrate because there are 6-8 people in my home, and young siblings would disturb during the online class. And I had no books or study materials.

Similarly, fieldwork, an essential component of many research projects, was delayed or adjusted to online data collection methods due to travel restrictions. This limitation prevented students from visiting local schools or conducting on-site research, resulting in delays in data collection and analysis. Meng, a student from China, explained how she had to extend her research timeline by six months due to the inability to gather data from local schools.

Limited interaction and guidance from supervisors and professors have also impacted students' academic experiences. Amar, a student from Mongolia, highlighted the challenges of reduced opportunities for casual interactions with professors or dropping by their offices for quick questions. Communication primarily through emails or scheduled appointments has resulted in longer response times, slowing down the progress of research work.

There is little opportunity to interact with professors casually or drop by their office when I have a question about small things. Writing emails or making appointments required more time to receive feedback. This had an impact on the speed of my research work.

The shift to online classes affected the quality of learning for some students. Anh, a Vietnamese student, noted that many professors simply converted their usual classes to online mode without adequate engagement or interaction. This lack of participation and limited opportunities to interact with peers has negatively impacted the learning experience. Anh noted, "Many professors just converted their usual classes to online mode... students often did not share videos and sometimes I could not interact with peer students."

The pandemic also significantly restricted networking opportunities and job-hunting prospects for international students. Zhang expressed disappointment at being unable to participate in in-person conferences throughout his entire PhD program, which limited her opportunities to network and seek job prospects. "During my whole PhD, I could not participate in any in-person conferences, which really limited opportunities to network, search for jobs," Zhang explained.

These examples demonstrate the adverse effects of the pandemic on international students' academic experiences, including setbacks in research progress, limited access to guidance from

supervisors and professors, decreased learning quality, and reduced networking and job-hunting opportunities.

Sociocultural integration and isolation

The pandemic severely restricted the sociocultural integration of international students, limiting their ability to engage with the local community and exacerbating feelings of cultural isolation.

The lack of face-to-face interactions exacerbated these anxieties, as students like Nara experienced a disconnection from their peers and community:

I do not know anyone in the dorm or in my cohort because we have to keep distance. Students in upper grades have shared groups on social media, etc., but we barely know each other.

The suspension of social gatherings, cultural events, and university clubs significantly hindered students' ability to integrate into Japanese society and form meaningful relationships. The lack of opportunities to engage in social activities, both within and outside the university, left many students feeling isolated. Arjun's difficulty in making friends underscores the importance of these social structures for emotional support and cultural adaptation:

I didn't have any friends when I first came to Japan, so I hoped to make new friends through the club activities at my university, however, due to the epidemic the clubs couldn't operate, and I wasn't able to make any friends.

Financial and daily life challenges

The economic impact of the pandemic, combined with practical challenges in daily living, created a difficult environment for international students. Many students faced severe financial challenges due to the loss of part-time employment, scholarships, and financial support from home. This financial instability was exacerbated by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Guo's account highlights the financial precariousness many students found themselves in. "After my master's degree in Japan, I was accepted for a Ph.D. in Australia but could not go due to the travel ban. I lost my scholarship and am continuing my study in Japan without any financial aid."

Securing and maintaining housing became a significant concern, with many students facing increased living costs and strict dormitory protocols. Jin's experience, where financial strain was compounded by her family's economic hardship, illustrates the intersection of housing and financial challenges. "My mom worked in the restaurant industry, and she lost her job, so she was no longer able to support me financially."

Finding part-time work became challenging for international students. Jin highlighted the difficulty of securing employment during the pandemic:

I've lost my part-time job as a translator which pays well. I plan to find simple part-time jobs like at convenience stores or McDonald's. But the number of applicants was very high, asking for people who could work at any time... I have to survive with 20,000 yen [USD\$140].

Japanese language proficiency and communication barriers

Due to a lack of Japanese language skills, international students faced heightened language barriers in their daily lives during the pandemic. Guo shared her experience:

Even though I can use English in my research, in my daily life, for example, when I go to the city hall, many language services have been stopped due to the pandemic, and it takes a lot of time to get things done.

This highlights the increased challenges faced by international students in navigating essential services during the pandemic, emphasizing the need for accessible language support in everyday situations.

The pandemic also highlighted significant barriers to accessing mental health support for international students, including language barriers and cultural stigmas associated with seeking psychological help. This lack of accessible mental health resources left many students struggling to cope with the emotional toll of the pandemic. For example, Qin, a Chinese student, shared:

I came to Japan at the beginning of the epidemic and found it difficult to express my situation and communicate with the staff when I sought counselling because my Japanese and English were not very good. I wish there were multilingual services available.

This case underscores the critical need for universities to provide mental health services in multiple languages to effectively support the diverse international student population.

Navigating the challenges: Strategies employed by international students

During the unprecedented challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, international students demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Faced with a host of difficulties, from academic hurdles to social isolation, students explored and utilized a variety of strategies to navigate their way through these turbulent times.

Leveraging university support services

A significant number of students turned to the support services offered by their host universities, which emerged as a lifeline during the pandemic. These services encompassed a broad spectrum of support mechanisms, including tutor services, language assistance programs, academic guidance, and mental health counseling. These resources were instrumental in helping students overcome language barriers, adjust academically, and manage the psychological toll of the pandemic.

Tutor services, in particular, received widespread acclaim from the student community. These services not only facilitated language learning and cultural adaptation but also provided academic mentorship. Students benefited from personalized instruction, which enabled them to better understand their coursework and improve their language proficiency. This personalized approach to learning helped students navigate the initial challenges of adapting to a new academic culture and environment.

Embracing online platforms and virtual learning

The shift towards virtual learning and the increased reliance on online platforms opened up new avenues for student engagement and skill development. Conferences, once a costly affair due to travel and registration fees, became more accessible and affordable. This shift democratized access to academic discourse and networking opportunities, enabling students to participate in global conversations without the financial burden traditionally associated with such events.

Qin from China highlighted the reduced financial barrier to attending academic conferences, which facilitated her active engagement with the broader academic community. “The registration fee for academic conferences is very high, but after changing to online or hybrid, you can register to attend for a very low fee”. This access to current research and professional networks was invaluable for students’ academic and career development, allowing them to stay connected with their fields of study and to build professional relationships.

Online classes and training sessions offered another significant advantage. The availability of diverse online courses, including language training, enabled students like Amar from Mongolia to pursue individual skill development tailored to their needs. “Suddenly there were many online classes. So, I could take online one-on-one Japanese language training”. This flexibility and access to a wide range of resources helped students maintain their academic momentum and continue their language and cultural learning journey despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

Seeking community and external support

Beyond institutional support, international students found solace and assistance within community networks. Ethnic or national groups, non-profit organizations (NPOs), non-governmental organizations

(NGOs), and local government agencies became crucial in providing a support framework for students. These organizations offered not just practical assistance, such as navigating local systems and understanding cultural norms, but also emotional support, helping students feel connected and supported in a foreign land.

Community support played a pivotal role in mitigating feelings of isolation and disconnection. Activities and programs organized by these groups provided international students with opportunities for cultural exchange and social interaction, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Such engagements were especially crucial in a time when social distancing measures limited physical interactions, offering a virtual bridge to maintain social connections and cultural ties.

Host families, where applicable, offered a unique form of support. For many international students, living with a host family provided a home away from home, offering a warm and nurturing environment that eased the transition into a new culture and society. These families not only provided practical support, such as assistance with daily living and navigating the local area, but also offered emotional support, helping students deal with homesickness and cultural shock.

The strategies employed by international students during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight their resilience and adaptability. By leveraging university support services, embracing online platforms for academic and professional development, and seeking community support, students managed to navigate the myriad challenges posed by the pandemic. These experiences underscore the importance of a robust support system, both within academic institutions and the wider community, in aiding international students' adaptation and success in their host countries. As the world continues to grapple with the pandemic's aftermath, the lessons learned from these strategies can inform the future development of support mechanisms for international students, ensuring they have the resources and support needed to thrive in their academic and personal endeavors.

Discussion

Key insights from the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected international students in Japanese universities, with challenges manifesting across various aspects of their lives, including psychological well-being, academic adjustment, sociocultural integration, daily life challenges, and Japanese language proficiency.

The pandemic exacerbated mental health issues among international students, including increased anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Previous studies have highlighted similar challenges globally, emphasizing the lack of adequate mental health support (Brotherhood, 2023; Chirikov & Soria, 2020). In Japan, the response was inconsistent, with some institutions providing mental health services while others lagged, reflecting a fragmented support system (Huang, 2024). Unlike in Western countries where

students reported facing overt xenophobia and racism (Liu et al., 2022), the challenges in Japan were more systemic, related to language barriers and limited support services.

The shift to online learning and the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures in academic settings posed significant challenges for international students. Many interviewees reported setbacks in their research activities, including delays in fieldwork, data collection, and access to necessary resources. This mirrors findings from other countries where similar disruptions affected students' academic progress (Hastings et al., 2023; Hari et al., 2023). However, some interviewees adapted by leveraging increased use of ICT, participating in online research conferences, internships, and finding online jobs to enhance their CVs. These adaptations reflect a broader trend of resilience and adaptability seen in international student communities globally (Cheng et al., 2024; Enkhtur et al., 2023).

International students in Japan experienced significant sociocultural integration challenges, exacerbated by travel restrictions and social distancing measures. These challenges are consistent with findings from other studies that reported increased feelings of isolation and difficulties in maintaining social connections during the pandemic (An & Berry, 2023; Mok et al., 2021). This isolation was particularly pronounced among newly arrived students, who experienced difficulties in establishing personal connections within their departments and research labs. Long-term students undergoing life transitions, such as starting families or seeking employment, also faced challenges in finding support and navigating changing environments. While students did not feel marginalized based on their ethnic background or race, they expressed a need for more support from professors and peers, highlighting the importance of a supportive academic and social environment.

Financial instability was a common issue among international students, with many facing loss of income due to reduced employment opportunities in sectors like tourism and food services. This financial strain was more pronounced among students depending on private funds, reflecting findings from other studies that highlighted the vulnerability of international students to economic shocks during the pandemic (Hastings et al., 2023). Additionally, age demographics played a role, as younger, predominantly single Chinese students often felt more isolated. Female international students with families, especially those with young children, faced additional challenges due to a lack of childcare support, making it difficult to balance parenting responsibilities with academic commitments.

Language proficiency remained a critical barrier for many international students in Japan, affecting both their academic performance and daily life navigation. The limited availability of English-language support services made it difficult for students to navigate academic and administrative processes. This issue was less pronounced in countries with more robust support systems for non-native English speakers. The research underscores the need for Japanese universities to expand language support services, including offering courses in business Japanese and ensuring a strong foundation in English for academic and professional purposes.

Strategic enhancements for student support

To address the psychological challenges faced by international students, it is crucial for Japanese universities to develop a more cohesive and comprehensive mental health support system. This includes providing accessible and culturally sensitive counseling services, mental health workshops, and peer support programs. Universities should also collaborate with international student organizations to raise awareness and reduce stigma associated with seeking help.

Given the disruptions caused by the pandemic, universities should implement flexible academic policies, such as extended deadlines and alternative assessment methods, to accommodate the needs of international students. Additionally, providing support for online learning, including training in digital tools and resources, can help students adapt to new learning environments. Institutions should also facilitate access to virtual research conferences and networking opportunities to support students' academic and professional development.

To enhance sociocultural integration, universities should offer more comprehensive orientation programs that include language training, cultural workshops, and social events to help students build connections. Creating mentorship programs that pair new international students with experienced students or faculty can also provide valuable support and guidance. Universities should encourage faculty and staff to engage more actively with international students, fostering an inclusive and supportive campus environment.

To alleviate financial burdens, universities should explore providing emergency financial aid, scholarships, and part-time job opportunities specifically for international students. Partnering with local businesses and organizations can also help create employment opportunities. Additionally, universities should offer financial literacy workshops to help students manage their finances effectively.

Language proficiency remains a significant barrier for many international students. Universities should expand language support services, including offering more courses in both English and Japanese. Providing targeted language programs, such as business Japanese or academic English, can better prepare students for their studies and future careers. Additionally, universities should ensure that key administrative processes and services are accessible in multiple languages.

Recognizing the unique challenges faced by international students with families, universities should provide family-oriented services, such as childcare facilities, family housing, and parenting workshops. This support can help alleviate the pressures of balancing academic responsibilities with family life.

To better understand and address the needs of international students, universities should regularly collect and analyze data on student experiences and outcomes. This data can inform the development of targeted support services and policies, ensuring that they are responsive to the evolving needs of the student population.

By implementing these recommendations, Japanese universities can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for international students, helping them to succeed academically, socially, and personally.

Conclusion

The post-pandemic era presents an opportunity for Japanese universities to lead in the internationalization of higher education by adopting comprehensive support strategies that address the academic, personal, and professional needs of international students. By doing so, universities can ensure a positive, inclusive, and enriching experience for all students, thereby enhancing their global competitiveness and fostering a truly international campus community. These efforts will not only support the recovery and success of international students but also contribute to the broader goals of global education and intercultural understanding in a post-pandemic world.

This study provides critical insights into the unique challenges faced by international students in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the importance of tailored support systems in higher education. The findings suggest that universities need to enhance their language and mental health support services, particularly for non-Japanese speaking students, to better accommodate diverse student populations. Additionally, the study highlights the necessity for stronger institutional policies that facilitate social integration and provide career development opportunities, which are crucial for the holistic well-being and future success of international students.

Furthermore, this research underscores the value of leveraging digital technologies to bridge gaps in academic and social engagement, an approach that could be expanded in the future to support students in times of crisis and beyond. The emphasis on digital integration offers a pathway for continuous improvement in educational delivery and student services, aligning with global trends towards more flexible and accessible learning environments.

Limitations included sample size and diversity, which may not fully represent the broader population of international students, potentially impacting the generalizability of the results. These limitations highlight the need for cautious interpretation of the findings and suggest areas for future research to explore more comprehensive and representative insights.

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