International Students in Japanese National Universities: Their Motivations, Experiences And Outcomes

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Abstract: *Given the criticism of the institutional practices of Japan's higher education institutions on international students' learning experiences, the study attempts to investigate why international students still chose to study at Japanese universities and whether they benefited from this experience. It also explores whether they benefit from this experience by focusing on their motivations, learning experiences, and outcomes of studying in Japan. Through semi-structured interviews with 12 international students who studied in two different national universities, the research findings illustrate that: firstly, international students' decision-making of studying abroad was a complex process involving their host environments and various considerations, including academic, cultural, and financial factors; secondly, despite numerous barriers encountered by international students, they were supported well in various aspects, and finally, they believed that they benefited significantly in four key domains, including personal growth, cultural enrichment, professional development, and better career opportunities. Theoretical and practical implications are also provided for researchers, administrators, and policies makers.*

Keywords: *inbound international students; Japan; motivations, experiences and benefits*

Introduction

Influenced by the advancement of globalization, knowledge-based society, and a necessity to boost Japan's global competitiveness of higher education institutions (HEIs), attracting international students has become one of the cornerstones and the main activity of internationalization of Japan's HEIs since the early 2000s (Huang, 2007). A series of policies have been carried out to improve the number and the quality of international students and the internationalization and global competitiveness of Japan's HEIs since the 2000s, such as the "300,000 International Students Plan" in 2008 and the "Global 30 Program" in 2009. While the number of students enrolled in Japan's HEIs has increased gradually from 2,740,023 in 2000 to 2,917,998 in 2021 (MEXT, 2000; MEXT, 2021), there has been a rapid growth in the number of inbound international students since the early 1980s. For example, inbound international students increased from approximately 10,000 in 1983 to 279,597 in 2021, representing 9.58% of the total students. The numbers of international students at the postgraduate and undergraduate educational levels in 2021 arrived at 53,056 and 79,826, respectively (JASSO, 2021a). Moreover, after graduation, more than 60% of them stayed in Japan; specifically, 36.9% of them worked in Japan, and the other 26.2% chose to continue their studies in Japan as of 2020 (JASSO, 2021b).

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Given the extensive policies and strategies, however, the internationalization of Japanese HEIs remains superficial (Ota, 2018). As argued constantly that the primary purposes of attracting international students at Japanese universities are to prevail in the domestic competition of Japanese universities since the government initiatives concerning internationalization generally bring research funding (Ota, 2018) and to externally visualize the internationalization of Japanese universities (e.g. Nonaka, 2020; Phan, 2013), little attention has been paid to international students' academic/learning experiences and outcomes. Under such a circumstance, why do international students still come to Japan, and what can they benefit from such an environment? Despite numerous previous studies investigating international students at Japanese universities concerning their motivations (e.g. Hennings & Tanabe, 2018; Sato, 2019; Futagami, 2021) and studying experiences (e.g. Rakhshandehroo, 2018), a specific exploration from this perspective is lacking.

Filling the research gap, the study attempts to provide possible explanations for this phenomenon by investigating inbound international students' motivations, experiences, and outcomes of studying at Japanese universities through semi-structured interviews with 12 international students from two case national universities. The following section reviews literature, followed by methodology. The fourth section analyzes the findings from the semi-structured interviews. Finally, the study concludes by discussing the main findings and presenting implications and limitations.

Literature Review

According to the scholarly interest of the study, existing literature from three broad areas was reviewed, namely, international students' motivation, experience, and outcome. Firstly, regarding their motivations for studying abroad, the situation from their home countries seems to "push" students abroad. For example, Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) argue the significant influences from economic and social forces of international students' home countries. In addition, some studies revealed that professional considerations, such as enhancing academic competency, professional knowledge, employment prospects, social network, and career attainment, could also affect students' decision to study abroad (e.g. Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; Wang & Crawford, 2020). Moreover, several researchers acknowledged other important considerations, such as their previous experience, cultural distance, and language learning (e.g. English, et al., 2016; Spinks, 2016).

In Japan, the existing research suggests that the main motivation for many international students from the East Asian cultural sphere is to receive academic degrees from Japan's HEIs. At the same time, most of those outside the Sino-sphere are interested in participating in professional development, such as improving their knowledge, capabilities, and skills to achieve career success (Sato, 2019). Furthermore, many of those who moved to Japan via short-term programs value their living experience in Japan more than their academic pursuits (Hennings & Tanabe, 2018). In the case of those from Japanese research universities, they were mainly attracted by three main factors: the education quality of Japanese universities, their fondness for Japan, and their scholarships (Futagami, 2021).

Secondly, regarding the experiences of international students, a great deal of research concentrated on the barriers and challenges in their host institutions. In English-speaking countries, previous studies mainly focused on factors critical to their adjustment to host countries, such as language, education, disconnection with local communities, perceived discrimination, and unjust treatment regarding employment opportunities (e.g. Tran & Vu, 2017; Velez-Gomez & Bell, 2018). For example, McClure (2007) argued that the experiences of being marginalized caused by the different expectations between Singapore and their original culture create significant tensions on the adjustment of international students. Campbell and Li (2008) identified the main challenges of Asian students in New Zealand, including language difficulties and cultural differences. Ammigan and Jones (2018) argued that all four dimensions of their satisfaction, namely, their arrival, living, learning, and support service experiences, were positively associated with students' overall university experience. Recent research describes Chinese students' challenges from the domestic American

students' perspectives concerning their integration at American Universities (Sato & Miller, 2021). Based on a case of a Korean university, Kim (2020) stressed that the engagement and interests in the local culture are strongly related to their evaluation and adjustment. In addition, prior knowledge, perceived relevance, belongingness, and cultural distance have been confirmed vital to the adjustment of international students (e.g. Karuppan & Barari, 2010).

In Japan, international students also face numerous challenges in their living and learning experiences. According to a quantitative study conducted by Ikeguchi (2012), focusing on Chinese students in Japanese universities, 81% of the respondents mentioned the difficulty of the Japanese language. Korean students in Japanese universities felt that they were a marginalized group and shared their challenges in communicating with local people because of the closeness and "group-consciousness" of Japanese people, as well the Japanese Honne (real feeling) and Tatemae (formal behavior) conflicts (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002). In addition, prior research also suggested financial problems encountered by international students. On the one hand, because most inbound international students study in private HEIs whose incomes significantly rely on tuition fees charged from international students, it is difficult for them to receive scholarships or other financial support (Sawa, 2019). On the other hand, more than half of the international students (55%) in Japan perceived the negative attitude from Japanese people, which led to the hardness of getting a part-time job directly and indirectly (Ikeguchi, 2012). Regarding the educational issues of international students, prior studies indicated the longer time for international students to earn doctoral degrees. This reality is especially true for those studying humanities and social sciences (around 5-6 years) because of the language problem, economic burden, advising system, and some academic traditions and conventions in Japanese universities (Iwasaki, 2015).

Thirdly, as cultural adjustment has been viewed as a process of cultural learning (Gill, 2007), outcomes have also been taken as an essential theme regarding their adjustment experience. Despite the obstacles in the adaptation process, prior studies have constantly indicated that the compelling experiences of studying abroad contribute to personal and cultural aspects, including self-confidence, language proficiency, intercultural communication, cultural sensitivity (e.g. Brown et al., 2016; English et al., 2016).

Relevant existing literature in Japan seems very limited. To date, Ogden claimed that the experience of studying in Japan might be valuable for Americans due to the lack of American professionals who have Asia experience (Ogden, 2006). In addition, a recent study suggested that international students in Japanese HEIs have been considered highly contributing to both their home and host countries and promote the internationalization of Japan's HEIs based on their learning experiences in Japan (Huang & Horiuchi, 2020).

In summary, as reviewed previously, compared to previous studies in English-speaking countries such as the US, and the UK, there has been much less research on international students in Japan despite their rapid expansion. Among those conducted in Japan, most of them either focused on a group of inbound international students from a specific country like China or Korea or discussed their motivations, experiences, or outcomes separately without taking all the three components as a whole. Moreover, prior studies in Japan addressed some specific cases, such as research universities (Futagami, 2021), short-term programs (Hennings & Tanabe, 2018), and English native international students (Rakhshandehroo, 2018), the investigation of university type of national/local/private is lacking.

Methodology and Research Questions

Based on earlier research and the main research awareness, the study is an explanatory research, investigating why international students still come to Japan and what they can benefit from given Japan's critical host environment. The research questions guild the study are as follows:
1)   What are international students' motivations for studying at Japanese national universities?
2)   What have they experienced at their current universities?
3)   What are the outcomes of their experiences at current universities?

The study is part of a joint international project in which a six-country team participated. Using common interview questions, the study analyzed main findings from interviews with relevant international students focusing on the following questions: "When deciding a place to study, how did you prioritize between institutions/nations of choice? What features of this institution/country attracted you to come and study here? "; "How would you summarize your experience as an international student? "; " How have you changed as a person while you have been an international student? "; "What have you experienced during your period of study?"; "What kind of growth have you gained while you have been an international student?"

National universities are concerned not only with postgraduate education for government-sponsored international students and those from low and middle-income countries. It also facilitates the advancement of basic and applied scientific research. Thus, it provides a wider variety of educational programs, where their contribution to capacity building is significantly more than the other two sectors of private and local HEIs (MEXT, 2019). Differing from national universities, local public universities are established, funded and administered by local authorities. They are primarily concerned with producing undergraduates for regional economic development and engaging in service activities for the local community. Given the distinctiveness of national universities and the research approach of case study as a common method in social sciences to better understand, describe, explain, and explore complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014), the study uses two national universities as case studies. The first case university is X University, one of the former "Imperial Universities" and was established in the late nineteenth century. It is a large comprehensive institution located in a global city, and the number of students is far higher than at the second case university, titled Y University. Y University is one of the newly-founded national universities post-WWII, located in the central part of Japan. It is a comprehensive national university where teaching and research activities and societal engagements are all emphasized in its mission. These two different case studies represent important features of Japan's national university sector.

The project determines the target population. All the interviews were undertaken in the six countries according to the same number of participants regarding gender, country of origin, discipline, and educational level. The potential interviewees were approached through criterion sampling based on the following information to ensure a variety. Firstly, according to the national statistics, the top three countries from which students moved to study in Japan are all East and Southeast Asian countries: the largest number of them came from China, followed by Vietnam and Korea, we invited most of the international students from the region. Secondly, by discipline, students from Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Engineering were invited: 'Linguistics' (n=2), 'Sociology'(n=1), 'Education' (n=1), 'Economics' (n=2), 'Engineering' (n=2), 'Tourism' (n=1), 'Transportation' (n=1), 'Architecture' (n=1), 'Agriculture' (n=1). Further, a gender balance was considered: 'Female=5' and 'Male=7'. Thirdly, by educational level, because many international students study at postgraduate programs in national universities, one undergraduate student, five master-level students, and six doctoral students participated in the interviews. Following ethics approval and the research project guidelines, we contacted potential key international students in national universities and asked them to accept our interviews through emails. As Table 1 shows, a wide range of international students from the two case national universities were interviewed based on the same questions.

All the interviews were undertaken from September 2017 to May 2018. We conducted face-to-face semi-structured qualitative interviews with these participants at their study places or meeting rooms in their affiliations. Participants were given a copy of a consent form to keep and refer to at any time. They were asked to complete all sections and sign the consent form if they were happy to participate. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The duration of interviews varied depending on individual interviews and topics. Most interviews lasted between around 40 minutes and two hours. According to interviewees' convenience and language proficiency, both Japanese and English languages were used in the interviews. To ensure the validity and reliability of the interviews, the transcripts were checked, reviewed and approved by all the participants.

Table 1. Outline of Interviewees

	Nationality	Gender	Academic Level	Discipline	Interview language	University
A	China	F	M2	Linguistics	Japanese	X University
B	China	M	D1	Sociology	Japanese	X University
C	U.S.A.	M	D2	Education	English	X University
D	Iran	F	D3	Linguistics	English	X University
E	Korea	M	B1	Economics	Japanese	X University
F	Indonesia	F	D2	Engineering	English	X University
G	Uzbekistan	F	M2	Tourism	English	Y University
H	Afghanistan	M	M2	Transportation	English	Y University
I	Indonesia	M	D3	Architecture	English	Y University
J	Vietnam	M	D2	Agriculture	English	Y University
K	China	F	M2	Economics	Japanese	Y University
L	China	M	M2	Engineering	Japanese	Y University

Note: *B=bachelor, M=master, D=doctoral course: a number beside degree level indicates the year students enrolled. For example, D2 means 2nd year doctoral course student.

Regarding the analytical process, the interview data was managed based on a six-step thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising (1) familiarization, (2) generating codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing codes, (5) Defining themes, and (6) producing report, which contributes to describing the dataset and summarizing the main characteristics thoroughly. After getting familiar with all the interview transcripts, the useful phrases were coded, usually in the interviewee's own words or a similar statement. Then, the sub-themes were developed through reviewing and combining similar codes. Therefore, Japanese codes were translated into English and combined with other English codes. To ensure the accuracy of the sub-themes, the codes to be determined, especially those in Japanese, were checked and confirmed with the interviewees. Finally, the themes were generated and defined by aggregating the sub-themes, which were subsequently analyzed from the three main domains.

Findings

Despite being asked about a wide and vague range of topics, the interviewees shared their concreted examples from their experiences to better demonstrate their perceptions and attitudes. The provision of the data analysis is aligned with the three research questions of the study: their motivations, experiences, and outcomes at the two case national universities.

Motivations for Studying at Japanese National Universities

When asked about their motivations for studying at Japanese national universities, some interviewees mentioned that although they were aware of the challenging environment in Japan, they had various essential reasons for coming to Japan. However, academic reasons appear to be the main driver for many students. Except for the ones from the US and Korea, all the students emphasized this incentive as follows:

> When choosing a study abroad destination…X University is one of the Imperial Universities in Japan, so I chose it. (A)

The most important thing I perceive is the quality of education in Japan. Japan had very high technology and development, I can learn from Japan how they developed their country and followed up science and technology, and I bring back home. That was my first and main consideration, actually. (I)

Japan is developed country and well known for its technology in agriculture...I want to learn how to make a high-quality flower in Japan and bring the method into Vietnam in the future. (J)

Some decided their destination on their own, based on their incentives and existing knowledge, while some interviewees pointed out the influences on their decisions by others, which can be found from the following quotations:

Objectively people try to find better facilities for research than Indonesia. That's why they head for developed countries...this is also why I came to Japan. (F)

I heard from my (undergraduate) teacher who went to a Japanese national university for exchanging that Japan is superior in earthquake-resistant research and technology. This is exactly what I wanted to study the most. So, I decided to come to Japan. (L)

Secondly, Japanese culture seems to impact attracting international students profoundly. This is because international students may pay attention to whether the local society and culture help them live and adapt when choosing to study abroad, which is particularly likely to be the case for those with religious backgrounds. The data analysis shows that all three students from Islamic societies mentioned this. As noted by one interviewee:

Culture is more important for me (rather than country) because adaptation is easier when you go to a place which is close to your own culture and your own experience...People here are so peaceful, friendly, and open. So, that's good for me. (G)

I am a Muslim, so I try to find a country which is more friendly to the Muslim, it is quite difficult...Japan seems to be this type of country. (I)

Additionally, many interviewees acknowledged their fondness for Japanese culture as their main incentive for coming to Japan. Those interviewees include the American student and students from China, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Iran.

The reason "Why Japan" is that I was attracted by Japanese culture since I liked Japanese pop culture such as animation and manga. (B)

I had an interest in Japan, the general cultures and life since I was very young. There were quite heavy influences in California. (C)

Japanese anime was so popular in Iran. I even remember some characters' names, "Tsubasa," "Wakabayashi," in football anime. Also, there was a very popular drama, "Oshin." That drama was very popular. (H)

Finally, for the students with low-income economies, the poor economic situation in their home countries may encourage them to study abroad in rich countries. Several interviewees in the study asserted this point:

After failing many times, finally, I got a job at the Ministry of Urban Planning. But the salary is so few. When I started the job, I applied for different scholarships for studying abroad. (H)

I decided to come to Japan because after graduated from university, I worked at company, but the salary was very low, and the job was stressful. (J)

Compared to countries like Australia, the UK, and the USA, Japanese universities, especially national universities, charge much cheaper tuition fees from international students. In addition, international students can also easily get access to various scholarships from local authorities, industry, and the Japanese government. Many students from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Iran that maintain a close economic relationship with Japan are either invited to study in Japan's national universities by the Japanese government or get some amount of scholarships from other sources. For example, among the interviewees, although only three of them (B, D, and F) were government-sponsored students, two of them received scholarships from private foundations.

My family is not wealthy, the tuition fees in most US universities are too expensive, and I cannot pay for them. So, I chose to come to Japan partly because I can get scholarships, partly also because I can do some part-time jobs to support myself. My university charges very much cheaper tuition fees than any private university, let alone US or UK universities. (E)

Originally, I planned to go to the US, but the cost is too high. (L)

In summary, the data analysis reveals that when deciding to study abroad, despite differences in degree, international students at the two case national universities were mainly motivated by academic, cultural, and financial factors. And their decision to stay in Japanese national universities was made after weighing the pros and cons.

Experience at Japanese National Universities

Regarding their experiences at the two case universities, many interviewees firstly mentioned the barrier caused by Japanese language. Despite the provision of English programs in national universities, the fact that some students can only be functional in Japanese language has resulted in the difficulty of international students.

One thing I know is, based on my experience, Japanese students are so shy. When it comes to speaking in English, they become nervous and uncomfortable. (H)

It was very difficult for me at the beginning because I am the only one who cannot speak Japanese in my lab…it's very difficult especially with Japanese culture to mix and blend. (I)

Most likely because of the aforementioned linguistic barrier, several interviewees criticized that they were usually divided into different groups from Japanese students during their group activities, leading to the disruption of multicultural communication.

The other goal would be to internationalize the general community by allowing domestic students exposure to international students and faculty, and giving them some kind of ideas of what it is like, working in an international multicultural environment. I would say, no…what I've seen the classes are kept pretty separated. (C)

The bad thing is that when the Japanese students want to conduct some events in lab, they always separate Japanese students from international students...If they want to be more international, I think they should mix all the students together. (L)

The lack of opportunity for intercultural communication and interactions may lead to their misunderstanding, which in a long term hinders their relationship development in their academic community.

When we talk with other international students, we can click very easily. But Japanese, they are maybe shy, hesitate. So, it's hard for us even just for asking questions...Our lab has students from Pakistan, Thailand, and some others, all of us have the same idea on Japanese people. (I)

The tension stemming from the lack of Japanese language proficiency is also apparent in their social-cultural aspects. As a non-English speaking country, the dominant language used in local society remains Japanese. One interviewee clearly expressed her constraints in this regard:

We may have problems in our daily social life. For example, in social life, when you go to City Office, you cannot find information in English. This is making us confused here. Most postings here are written in Japanese. (G)

Additionally, cultural differences were also identified as a profound factor impacting their social lives in Japan, which may cause communication misunderstanding, conflicting personal values, and other difficulties. As illustrated below, despite the cultural similarities between China and Japan, cross-culture misunderstanding happened when a Chinese student interacted with a Japanese student.

There is a risk in intercultural communications since cultural background is different, misunderstanding might occur. For example, when my Chinese female friend went to hang out for a drink with a Japanese male student, then that guy thought that she likes him. The relationship between two became awkward since then. (B)

Finally, overwhelmingly some international students even felt they experienced national origin discrimination, resulting in their uncomfortable and stressful sentiments in daily life.

When I bought a mobile phone, the sales person asked me so many details probably due to my nationality. It was a little annoying experience. (A)

Not as an international student but as a Chinese, I feel occasionally being looked down on. For example, after using a university gymnasium and forget to turn off the light, international students from western countries are allowed without being blamed but Chinese and Korean students got scolded. There seems a difference in attitudes from Japanese people depending on the race. (B)

Given the special geographic location of Japan, one of the interviewees explained aforementioned issues with the assumption that:

The barrier is that Japanese language and Japanese culture are difficult to merge, because language is totally different and the environment Japanese students grew up is pretty homogeneous and they don't have the same opportunity with Western or European countries talking with foreigners in their daily life. (H)

Despite numerous barriers faced by international students, almost all of them emphasized the meticulous support provided by both their belonging universities and local communities. One of the students expressed her appreciation to her supervisor:

I'm really grateful for my supervisor. So, I do not have any problem with my academic life regarding credits and my research. I feel always very big support from him. He always shows me the right way...This is really I feel during these years and grateful for it. (G)

In terms of the support from administrative staff, most interviewees agreed with the point that they were provided with high-quality service. Some of them clearly asserted the following points:

Most of the cases, they are doing more than what they are supposed to, especially for international students. It's not very unusual. If I go to X office and ask something, they kindly find information even calling that person talking in Japanese and trying to understand what's going on. Even though maybe that engagement is not their duty or their task. (H)

We have a coordinator here who always supports us if you have any kind of problem. We can call anytime, 24 hours a day. They are so good to do their job. So, I think this is a really professional service, and you cannot imagine. So, no problem now. (G)

In addition, there is a special system in some Japanese universities, named Tutor System. Generally, these universities arrange a senior tutor for newly come international students to help them deal with their problems in daily life and study. Several interviewees expressed their gratitude to their tutors and also had a very high evaluation of the system.

The support from university was very helpful, especially the tutor. When I came to Japan, two seniors from my laboratory picked me up at the airport, which impressed me a lot. (L)

Also, one thing that international student has to learn about is that Japan has a senior-junior culture. In my view, those senior-junior relationship is really good because juniors are new and do not know everything. They need to learn how to work, and also how to speak to the boss. So, they could learn step by step. (J)

Moreover, regarding the support from the community, even though sometimes English materials are not available, the effort made by local people was greatly appreciated by the interviewees.

I have not any difficulty now. When I go to the city hall to get some documents, it is quite easy for international students because the Japanese officers are taking care of us very carefully. (J)

When you go to the city office or immigration office or any kind of governmental agency, they are doing their best. They are not pushing you away or wasting your time. They are always respecting you in a very well-mannered way. I think it's only limited to Japan. (H)

Apparently, the interviewees described their experience at the case universities mainly from two aspects. The first is concerned with the challenges they faced in terms of academic and social life, primarily stemming from the Japanese language and culture. Secondly, despite the inconvenience caused by these issues, the majority of the interviewees emphasized the great support from both on and off-campus.

Outcomes of Being an International Student at Japanese National Universities

Regarding their outcomes of studying in Japan, benefits from various aspects were stressed. The first one being noted is often their personal growth as they were living in a foreign country away from their families and friends. As asserted by several interviewees, due to the long distance from their home countries, studying abroad provides them the opportunities to develop their independent personality:

> *I gained an independent spirit. Being distant far from my family, I have to take care of myself here. So, I think I have been strengthened in that sense. (A)*

> *The most important thing is to be independent... After surviving through a lot of first experiences, I feel like becoming stronger now. Independence and strength are assets I gained as a person here. (B)*

> *I became very independent. Because I am studying here, which is far away from my family, even though something bad happened, I never tell my family, I have to do everything by myself. (K)*

Also, studying and living abroad in a foreign country provides international students with diversified perspectives and multicultural awareness, which may lead to changes in their original perceptions and attitudes.

> *I started thinking differently when something happened. The way of looking at something has expanded, and I have learned a logical way of thinking through being here. This has never happened in the past of my undergraduate school. (L)*

> *After being here, I never feel that only Korea is a wonderful country. When I was in Korea, there are always news like "Korea is number one in this area". It's not the case, it's wrong when I came to Japan. Now I can evaluate my country more objectively. (E)*

In addition, being exposed to the environment with Japanese culture enriches international students' cultural literacy, which in a long term may help to shape their new personalities. This point was emphasized by several interviewees as shown below:

> *It changed me a lot since I came to Japan...Trying to think about others is what I learned from Japan. (F)*

> *I became more patient, I learned from Japanese people to be more patient and to pay more attention...you will look everything in detail. (G)*

The experiences of living in Japan not only increased their cultural understanding, which made them more multiculturally adaptable, but also led them to think about the differences between Japan and their home countries.

> *Moving to a place like Japan, which is a very particular way of doing things, it's been interesting to really learn not just about multiculturalism or inter-culturalism but about really stark differences between cultures. (C)*

> *One thing an international student has to learn about is that Japanese has a senior-junior culture. In Vietnam, they do not follow others and have to take care of everything by themselves. In my view, those senior-junior relationship is really good. (J)*

Moreover, given the advanced technologies in Japan, being a student in Japanese universities would be significantly beneficial for their professional development, which was highlighted by almost all of the interviewees. For example, most interviewees stressed their professional knowledge and skills acquired from this experience.

About knowledge and experiences, technical knowledge of engineering, I can say that this is very big benefit for me to earn all of them here, which is something that I could not acquire at home. (G)

The course of study in transportation fields is still beneficial for me. I learned many things, how to manage, how to handle the problems at transportation engineering. Many new interesting knowledges. (H)

I learned many things, for example, the knowledge and skills, how to write a scientific paper. (J)

Some interviewees took the experiences of living and studying in Japan as a great opportunity to improve their Japanese proficiency. It seems to be especially true in the case of international students from Humanities and Social Sciences.

My Japanese language skills have been really improved, since I have to immerse myself into Japanese speaking environment at a daily basis. (A)

In addition to the knowledge in sociology, I made a lot of Japanese friends, which enhanced my Japanese proficiency as well as social customs...Through communicating with Japanese peers, my Japanese language skill has been raised. (B)

Finally, it appears that the studying experiences in Japan are highly associated with the career establishment of international students. In addition to better career opportunities, like higher-paying and higher-skilled jobs, over half of the interviewees anticipated that a degree from their current universities would offer them additional prestigious benefits when they return home, which can be hardly achieved at their home countries.

A degree from Japanese universities, especially national universities, is highly valued in my country. (A)

It is the top-ranking national university in Japan, I believe it will be highly valued and beneficial when I return. (B)

The first benefit is opening the path for me to go to Ph.D. The second benefit might be that I can get other jobs. (H)

There is a possibility I will get promotion and a higher salary. I'm not sure but it is due to my degree. (I)

A degree from a Japanese university is more valuable than any from a Vietnamese university. If I go back to Vietnam with a doctoral degree, I can easily get a job. (J)

The master's degree from a Japanese national university is more highly regarded than the master's degree from a general university in China. (K)

I think it would be easier for me to find a job in a Chinese university since I have a degree from a good Japanese national university. (L)

As analyzed above, four broad benefits of studying at Japanese national universities were identified from the interviewees' observations: personal growth, cultural enrichment, professional development, and better career opportunities. These benefits may vary depending on individual participants, however, they are viewed to contribute to international students both professionally and socially.

Concluding Remarks and Discussion

Given the fact that the attraction of international students may be seen as a beneficial instrumental term for Japanese universities since they were closely associated with research funding (Ota, 2018) and externally visualization of internationalization (e.g. Nonaka, 2020; Phan, 2013), existing evidence has constantly criticized Japan' HEIs as a negative case for its international students. Under such a circumstance, the study is the first attempt to investigate why international students still chose to study in Japan and whether they benefit from this environment by focusing on their motivations, learning experiences, and outcomes at the two case Japanese national universities. The key findings yielded from the study can be discussed subsequently.

Firstly, the data analysis indicates that international students' motivation to study in the case universities can be explained by the factors from academic, cultural, and financial aspects broadly. From a micro perspective, a majority of the interviewees were motivated to Japan by the higher academic quality and reputation of their affiliated Japan's universities than the universities in their home countries, which is consistent with the existing evidence (e.g. Sato, 2019; Wang & Crawford, 2020). Given the limited information before going abroad, their decisions sometimes seem to be strongly influenced by other people, such as their teachers or friends. This is similar to prior research (Chen, 2008; Futagami, 2021). Additionally, some interviewees stressed their cultural considerations, such as their fondness of Japanese culture, reinforcing previous studies (e.g. Futagami, 2021). However, in the case of the students from countries with a religious background, such as Indonesia and Iran, the cultural accommodation of their possible destinations was found as a significant consideration, which has not been identified yet.

From a macro perspective, the financial gap between home country and Japan serves to encourage international students' mobility. This is more likely to be the motivation of those from low-income economies. Therefore, international mobility of students is affected by factors both operate from international students' home countries and destination countries, which largely matches with the existing research (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Sánchez, et. al., 2006). The findings reveal that international students' decision-making of studying abroad is a complex process involving various considerations, including academic, cultural, and financial factors. This explains why many international students still chose to come to Japan despite the criticism of the institutional practices of Japan's HEIs.

Secondly, regarding their experiences at Japanese national universities, the study found that a majority of international students in Japan's national universities encountered language and culture issues, which is largely consistent with previous studies (e.g. Ikeguchi, 2012; Iwasaki, 2015). This is probably why existing literature has constantly criticized Japan as a negative case for internationalization and international students (e.g. Nonaka, 2020; Ota, 2018).

However, almost all the interviewees acknowledged that they are well supported on campus and outside campus in their professional and social lives. This is probably because the Japanese society and Japan's national universities realize the importance and value of attracting inbound international students to come to Japan and are making efforts to provide good support for them (Ito, 2019; JASSO, 2019-2020). Given the limited attention paid specifically to the perceived support of international students in Japan, the findings in this regard have enriched the discourses of existing literature.

Finally, despite the challenging host environment, almost all participants emphasized their benefits drawn from studying in Japanese national universities from four main domains: personal

growth, cultural enrichment, professional development, and better career opportunities. Given the fact of being an international student in a foreign country, the growth in personal, cultural, and professional dimensions, such as language improvement, cultural enrichment, and professional development, is in tandem with the findings of most prior research (e.g. Nilsson, et al., 2016; English, et al., 2016). However, the benefits of additional value, such as a more prestigious opportunity that no graduate student from their home countries could ever achieve, added from studying in Japan has not been found yet by the existing research.

Regarding the implications, firstly, the study provides possible explanations by applying interview data to address the issue awareness concerning international students who come to study in Japan despite the challenging host environment. In addition, the research findings present empirical evidence for more relevant studies in this regard. Moreover, given the perceived constraints of international students stemming from Japanese language and culture, a more comprehensive policy recommendation from the attraction to the integration of international students should be made. In other words, in addition to actively recruiting international students, it is equally significant to create a supportive environment where good multicultural communication can be achieved. This can greatly facilitate their integration and thus enhance their retention in Japan.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. As revealed earlier, this study was conducted with a limited small size of interviewees to offer some possible explanation, it may be better to interview with a large body of inbound international students with more diverse backgrounds in Japan. Also, more studies need to be made in inbound international students' experiences at a program or course level. Moreover, due to the small number of interviewees, no significant differences could be confirmed in their motivations, experiences, and outcomes among the interviewees by country of origin, gender, educational level, discipline, and affiliation. More comprehensive and in-depth research studies in this regard are needed.

Note:

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