



ASEAN Students Look to Japan; But Still a Long Way to Go

Description

Students from the ASEAN countries¹ are increasingly choosing to study in Japan, bolstering the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's efforts to reach a target of 300,000 international students by 2020² (the figure in 2014 stood at 184,133 –³ 139,185 of whom were studying at institutes of higher education).

[The Japan Times](#) reports that, between May 2013 and 2014, the number of Vietnamese students in Japan increased by 91%, putting their proportion of the country's international students second only to China. Over the same period there were more modest, yet still impressive rises in the number of Thai (13%), Indonesian (14%), Burmese (21%), Filipino (12%) and Singaporean (22%) students. In all, ASEAN students accounted for 38,970⁴ or 21%⁵ of the total number of international students in Japan.

In order to encourage and also to capitalize on this movement, the Japanese government has offered 11 Japanese universities subsidies to participate in the student exchange program, AIMS (ASEAN International Mobility for Students).

Troubled efforts to attract international students

Students from these nations and China will be central if Japan is to be successful in meeting its ambitious target, set in 2008. It will not be easy for the world's third-biggest economy. Though figures show a 9% increase in international students between 2013 and 2014 (the latest year for which JASSO statistics are available), this is the first time since 2011 that we've seen any serious growth, with a high exchange rate for the yen and slow economic recovery no doubt playing a part.

Notably, 2011 is also the year in which China overtook Japan to become the world's second-biggest economy. China's fortunes form a sharp contrast to Japan's in this regard. In 2014, according to [IIE statistics](#), China played host to 8% of the world's international students, up from less than 2% in 2001. Japan's share of the international student market has stagnated at 3% over the same period. What will perhaps be of greatest concern is the 5% decline in students studying in Japan at [undergraduate level between 2011 and 2014](#).

Moves have been made to try and buck this trend – though not always with great success. In 2013, [the University of Tokyo abandoned a touted shift of its calendar](#) which would have seen the academic year starting in autumn as in the West, as opposed to the Japanese model in which the academic year follows the calendar year. The move was intended to encourage the inflow of international students as well nurturing a generation of internationally-minded Japanese graduates (the proportion of Japanese students studying abroad is also a cause for concern).

While that may have been a non-starter, universities have made efforts to surmount one of the biggest obstacles to international students studying in Japan, by [offering a greater number of degree programs in English](#). This has not always been sufficient, however, with nearly 70% of students accepted to undergraduate programs taught in English at the University of Tokyo, for example, [choosing ultimately to study somewhere else](#), despite the university's high global standing.

A parable against complacency

The positive trend recorded in 2014 will then make very positive reading for stakeholders in Japanese higher education, with the rise of students from ASEAN nations offering an indication of the value of changing tack in order to best capitalize on changing patterns of international student mobility. This, however, could lead to a dangerous overreliance on students from a handful of sending nations. Indeed, the ICEF Monitor notes that 92.7% of international students in Japan come from Asian countries, the top five of which (China, Vietnam, South Korea, Nepal and Taiwan) account for 83% of the total. While shifts in student mobility might currently be working in Japan's favour, we certainly cannot assume the next trends will be as positive.

Japan's story in this regard – mirroring its economic trials and tribulations – stands as a parable against complacency for any host nation of international students. To simply be able to boast high standards and a prime spot on the global stage is not enough to guarantee success.