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## Opinion and Perspective

# The Impact of Population Decline on Foreign Faculty at Japanese Universities Toward 2040

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Government figures for births in 2022 give a good indication of the number of 18-year-olds who will be resident in Japan in 2040. These figures suggest a steady decline in undergraduate enrollments at Japanese universities, possibly falling as low as 80% of current enrollment. This paper explores ways that the loss in enrollment may be mitigated through recruiting more international students, as well as countermeasures universities may adopt in response to this crisis, including merger, use of more part-time staff, lowering of entry requirements, and raising of tuition fees. There is an assessment of the potential impact that each of these countermeasures may have on international faculty members and the job market towards 2040. There is a list of factors to consider when assessing one's own job security. The paper concludes that the pace of change is largely understood and that those who assess their jobs as insecure should take steps to futureproof themselves with the acquisition of new skills.

Japan's fertility rate of 1.2 is far below the 2.1 replacement rate needed for population stability (McCartney, 2024). A projection submitted to the Central Council for Education predicts that post 2040, the number of students entering Japanese universities could fall by approximately 130,000 from 2022 levels to 80% of total capacity (Lem, 2023). This news will be of concern to many working in higher education, amongst them the approximately 21,000 international faculty members at universities in Japan (Williams, 2019). Low birth rates can be seen across the developed world, but the situation is especially acute in Japan, where a depressed economy has led to stagnant wages, job insecurity and the prevalence of temporary employment (Ito and Hoshi, 2020). The problem is exacerbated in rural areas due to prolonged migration towards cities, with approximately 92% of

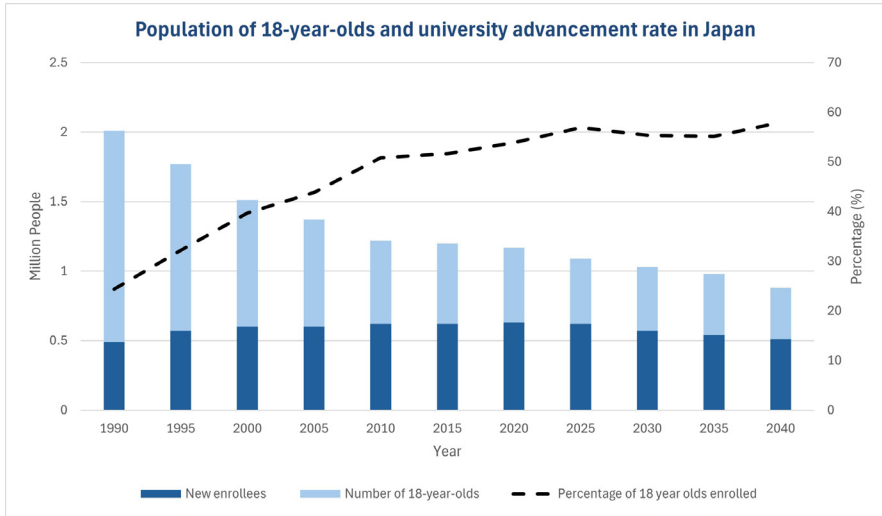
residents now living in urban and suburban areas (World Bank, 2023).

The aim of this paper is to clarify what large-scale loss of enrollment will mean for international faculty members as we move towards 2040. After a brief explanation of the problem using figures and projections, there is a discussion of a key factor which may help to mitigate some of the lost enrollment: the diversification of the student base to include more international students. The discussion moves on to consider possible responses to lower enrollment on the part of universities: restructuring; employing more part-time faculty, lowering entry requirements; and/or raising tuition fees. Finally, the paper concludes with factors faculty members should consider when assessing the security of their position and advises those who feel their job may be insecure to take action to make themselves more marketable in a competitive job market moving towards 2040.

## **Student numbers in 2040**

The prediction submitted to the Central Council for Education was based on data from the National Institution of Population and Social Research. The number of new university enrollments in 2040 was calculated by examining total births in Japan in 2022 (18 years old in 2040), multiplying by the predicted ratio of university enrollment, and adding expected international student numbers. The number of international students was predicted to be close to 3% (Lem, 2023). Figure 1 shows that the population of 18-year-olds in Japan almost halved from a peak of 2,050,000 in 1992 (MEXT, 2019) to approximately 1,060,000 according to a government estimate in 2023 (Kyodo News, 2023). Despite total population fall, the number of undergraduates entering university increased from 540,000 in 1992 to 630,000 in 2023 (Nikkei Asia, 2023). With the ratio of university enrollments increasing from 23% in 1992 to 59% over the same period (population of 18-year-olds, divided by the number of enrollees), the increase in enrollment was accompanied by considerable expansion in university real estate and course development (MEXT, 2024).

However, the government had predicted the number of university enrollments will decrease from 2022 onwards, leading to a shortfall of



*Figure 1.* Population of 18-year-old Residents in Japan and University Entry Rates 1992-2017 with Predictions for 2018-2040. Source: Adapted from The Overview of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT 2019: 29).

123,000 students from 2022 levels by 2040, or to around 80% of total capacity (McCartney, 2024).

A further problem is the compactification of population centered around a small number of large municipalities such as Tokyo and Osaka (Hori et al, 2021). Despite efforts to slow the trend of growing cities, rural depopulation has spread to suburban areas and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism has estimated that in 60% of inhabited areas across Japan, population loss will be 50% or greater by 2050 (MLIT, 2018). This would exacerbate an already difficult situation for universities outside of the largest urban centers. The prediction of enrolment levels in 2040 estimated that enrolment would be highest in Chiba, at 86.6% of capacity. Whilst, Oita Prefecture would have the lowest enrolment rate at 70%, followed by Tokushima at 74.2% and Okayama at 74.5% (Yomiuri Shinbun, 2023).

## **Mitigating Factors: International Enrollment**

To counteract the damage of population decline, the Education Ministry stated its aim of diversifying the student base to raise enrollments since Japan's ratio of foreign students is far lower than the 8% average across G7 countries (Osamu, 2022). However, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of international students studying at Japanese higher education institutions (excluding language schools), had been rising year on year with a 65.4% increase in just nine years 2011-2019 (JASSO, 2020). The education ministry hopes international student enrollment will have returned to the level immediately preceding Covid-19 by 2027 and surpass it in the following years (Osumi, 2022).

Recruitment drives will be aided by promotional campaigns abroad in conjunction with Japanese universities and the use of existing alumni networks (Osumi, 2022). An increase in government scholarships coupled with the offer of residency status post-graduation are hoped to further entice international enrollment, with the Education Ministry also announcing plans for greater support of international graduates seeking employment in Japan (Akimoto, 2024).

However, it may be unrealistic to anticipate an influx of international students to mitigate lower enrollment among Japanese. The largest contingent of international students pre-Covid-19 was from China, which accounted for 54% of the international student population (JASSO, 2020), but in the coming years China will be facing its own depopulation crisis (McCartney, 2024). In addition to proximity, a key reason why Chinese students constitute the majority of international students in Japan is shared use of kanji. Were more courses available in English, new opportunities for international recruitment would open. Thus, emerging markets with growing populations have been identified as areas to concentrate international recruitment efforts, notably from India, the world's largest population. Successful recruitment of international students would mitigate some of the predicted enrollment loss. For example, were Japan able to attract international students at the average G7 rate, enrollment in 2040 could be boosted from 80% to 85% of capacity (Nikkei Asia, 2023). Thus, universities would need to take less drastic countermeasures, resulting in a more buoyant job

market for international faculty members moving towards 2040.

The effort to internationalize may be beneficial to the international faculty staff already in Japan. Recruitment of international faculty from overseas currently lags behind many other countries, and universities still tend to internationalize from within, recruiting mainly from the narrow pool of foreign researchers already resident in Japan, who may have advantages in terms of language ability and cultural understanding (Williams, 2019). Additionally, low-inflation and the economic downturn in Japan, have made Japan less competitive salary wise than North America or Europe (Ito and Hoshi, 2020). Many foreign faculty may also feel aggrieved to discover they are required to pay into the national pension scheme, whilst never intending to stay in Japan long enough to recoup their investment. With Japan holding only a few bi-lateral pension agreements, many foreign nationals find that amount of pension contributions they can recover is capped at three-years, regardless of how long they have been paying in (Byma, 2021). Applicants from abroad face hurdles such as language and cultural difficulties, and “procedural hurdles, such as universities that do not pay travel expenses, or interviewers who disregard non-Japanese teaching experience” (Williams, 2019: 2). Therefore, International faculty who already reside in Japan may enjoy a competitive edge as falling enrollment squeezes the job market. However, if Japanese universities really want to be globally prestigious, competitive, truly international, and diverse, they are obligated to recruit a higher quality of academic from outside of Japan. This will open a whole new sphere of competition in an already over-supplied job market.

## **Responses to falling enrollment**

Despite efforts to mitigate the loss, Japanese university enrollment in 2040 looks set to be considerably lower than present capacity (Lem, 2023). A key question for international faculty is how universities will respond.

The future would appear to be brighter at national universities than private institutions. In Japan, public perception of the high standard of education at national universities and the lower tuition fees they charge will likely maintain enrollment at close to capacity, since public trust and low tuition fees represent

good value in a crowded marketplace. Since 2004 national universities have been incorporated under The Japan Association of National Universities (JANU), allowing autonomy in their management, but also bringing financial challenges (Yonezawa, 2023). The need to streamline and operate with efficiency became essential since the government reduced the total budget for national universities by 1% every year, for the years 2004-2014 (Yonezawa, 2023). Funding is now based upon performance assessment, and the meeting of targets set out in a 6-year plan. Due to their prestige, national universities should enjoy a competitive advantage in maintaining enrollment numbers. However, they are by no means immune to budgetary pressure, and must be run efficiently and on-budget.

The situation at private universities appears more perilous. Private institutions make up approximately 75% of higher education in Japan (Williams, 2019). Less-prestigious private universities have experienced a shortage of applicants due to the saturation of the market (Yonezawa, 2023). Since private universities rely on tuition and enrollment fees for 70% of their income (Nikkei Asia, 2023), it is likely that without outside help many of these universities will become inviable as the student population drops. Measures currently being considered by the education ministry for failing universities include reorganization, consolidation, and closure in the worst cases.

Where universities can stay operational, it may be the result of the following countermeasures:

- Mergers and resource sharing
- Use of more part-time lecturing staff
- Lowering entry requirements
- Raising tuition fees

There follows a short discussion of each of these countermeasures and the possible impact upon international faculty members.

### **Mergers and Resource sharing**

The Mainichi surveyed 82 national universities in 2018 and reported that nine were in the process of merging, with a further four considering a merger (Izawa, 2019). Furthermore, in April 2022, Kobe Shinwa Women's University

relaunched to include men and was able to increase its enrollment of freshmen by 47% (Shimokawa and Miura, 2023). Most recently, the state-run Tokyo Institute of Technology and Tokyo Medical and Dental university will merge in late 2024, under the new name “Institute of Science Tokyo.” The catalyst for this merger was a government fund aimed at improving the global standing of Japanese universities. This fund totals approximately 10 trillion yen (\$77 billion) (Yamamoto, 2023). In several cases, local governments have taken over the running of failing private universities, especially in the countryside (Lem, 2023). This ‘local public university model’ may be another option where the regional government can see merit in keeping institutions viable in some capacity, to serve the local area.

The boom in higher education in the early 2000s was accompanied by expansion and real estate acquisition (MEXT, 2024). If two struggling universities were able to share resources or merge into a single entity, it would facilitate increased management efficiency and effective utilization of resources (Izawa, 2019), allowing the sale of assets to free up resources and alleviate financial pressure. However, the potential for job losses which often accompany mergers, should be of concern to faculty members.

### **Use of more part-time lecturing staff**

University faculty are employed under two broad categories:

- Tenured employees (*sennin koushi* in Japanese),
- Employees on fixed-term contracts (*tokunin koushi*), who are:
  - Full-time, or
  - Part-time.

Fixed-term contracts are typically between one to five years in length.

A stagnant economy for over three decades means that salaries and benefits are no longer globally competitive (Williams, 2019). This problem will be exacerbated by the recent slump in value of the yen, at least in the short-term. Of over 21,000 international faculty members, the majority are employed on fixed-term contracts for part-time work (Williams, 2019). Of the approximately 8,100 international faculty employed full-term, the majority are on fixed-term

contracts rather than being tenured employees (Williams, 2019). Furthermore, of these 8,100, approximately two-thirds are ethnically Korean or Chinese, and may have been born and educated in Japan rather than being recruited internationally (Williams, 2019). Thus, many international faculty at universities in Japan remain on short-term contracts, with a requirement to renew or move institution every few years. Of these, a disproportionate number are women, younger academics, those without a PhD, or those working in TESOL-related fields (Larson-Hall and Stewart, 2018). For these workers job security is minimal since when the contract expires, they must apply for another at their current institution or compete for a job elsewhere.

Due to the proliferation of fixed-term contracts, individual universities preserve the ability to shrink or close departments as needed. Thus, they are not overburdened by redundancy payments and can act with flexibility to meet market needs (Itakura, 2021). This flexibility should be cause for reflection for faculty in this position. A fixed term position on a limited period rolling contract is precarious. Given the problems that universities face over the coming years, those in this type of position should heed the warning that the contract they have been signing every year may not be there forever and take steps to improve their marketability in the future by acquiring qualifications and skills.

### **Lowering entry requirements**

It seems unlikely that lowering entry requirements will be a viable countermeasure to falling enrollment. Preserving the integrity of higher education in Japan is part of MEXT's remit and they are concerned that some private universities, facing low enrollment, may adopt more flexible admission policies by lowering entry requirements to appeal to a greater number of high school graduates. However, MEXT dissuades such policy changes, urging private universities to establish quality assurance systems for the provision of high-quality education (MEXT, 2022). In the future, the national university model of performance related funding may be applied in the public sector, with the implication that public funding will only be available to private universities that increase the quality of the education they offer (Yonezawa, 2023).



## **Raising tuition fees**

The operational budgets of private universities have been supported by the central government since the 1970s (Yonezawa, 2023), and some argue they have been underfunded. At 4.1% of GDP in 2022 (OCED, 2023), Japan spends less on education than many developed countries. This compares with an average of 5.1% across OECD countries (OCED, 2023). Since 2005, the standard tuition fee for national universities has been maintained at 817,800 JPY (Yonezawa, 2023). Tuition fees at private universities, set by the universities themselves, have also barely changed since 2005 (averaging 1,357,080 JPY in 2021). When compared with the rapid increase of tuition fees in the US, the UK, Australia, and China in the same timeframe, higher education in Japan remains relatively inexpensive (Kobayashi, 2020).

Yonezawa (2023) argues that the central government may be poised to take a more heavy-handed approach to regulating private universities in coming years. It is argued that publication of 2040 enrollment predictions may be the catalyst for tighter government control of higher education in the future, and that this could mean a rise in tuition fees across the board (Yonezawa, 2023). Raising tuition fees as a countermeasure to lower enrollment will only be effective if it is implemented across all institutions. Were tuition fees to rise, some of the budgetary pressure universities operate under may be released. Bigger budgets may reduce the need for some of the more drastic countermeasures discussed above. There may be a knock-on effect in improving the job security of international faculty members. However, it will be difficult to strike the correct balance, as a rise in fees could also discourage enrollment further, especially when considering the economic stagnation of recent decades.

## **The Job Market in 2040: Will my job still exist?**

The key concern of this paper is the future job security of the approximately 21,000 international faculty members at Japanese universities. A loss of up to 20% of new enrollments will be significant, and the extent to which this can be mitigated by increased international student enrollment is unclear. Drastic countermeasures may need to be taken. These range from closures and mergers to

tuition fee rises and the use of more part-time staff. The good news is that looking at the number of births in 2022 gives a good indication of the pace of change. A fall of 120,000 averaged over 18 years (2022-2040) equates to a decrease of 6,666 students per year. This represents slightly more than 1% of 2022 enrollee numbers. If international recruitment drives are successful, this number would be even lower. Therefore, any decline will be gradual.

Additionally, those with a good working proficiency in English may enjoy an advantage in the coming decades. Since the primary language of instruction at Japanese universities is Japanese, a language with relatively few speakers outside Japan, internationalization of Japanese universities requires that more courses will be taught in foreign languages, notably English. At present the practice of recruiting from within Japan gives an advantage to those already in residence. Many international faculty members who teach TESOL-related subjects may have a role in developing the use of English in other faculty courses.

## **How can I protect myself?**

Any teacher looking for job stability in the future should consider their current employment status. There are many factors to consider, contract status, national or private university, university location, and the prestige of an institution. Table 1 is a breakdown of the questions international faculty should be asking to assess their employment status before the expected drop in enrollment leads to a downturn in the job market.

In 2040, the number of university teaching positions can be expected to decrease in line with lower enrollment. This may result in an increasingly competitive job market. Individuals must take responsibility for their own marketability in the future. This means taking stock of one's own situation and futureproofing oneself by acquiring new skills, embracing new technology, and adapting to the market. For those living outside of urban centers, there may be a need to travel further afield for work or be open to relocation.

As education becomes increasingly digital, technical literacy will be an essential component of a faculty member's job in the future. Teachers should be skilled in online learning platforms, collaboration tools and multimedia

Table 1

*Factors Determining Future Job Security for International Faculty Employees in Japan*

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**Self-reflection questions**

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**Tenure or rolling contract?** Rolling contracts have an expiry date. Tenure offers security and redundancy should an institution be forced to close.

**National or private university?** National universities may have an advantage in future enrollment over private universities, although strict management means they are not immune from mergers or consolidation of departments.

**Urban or rural area?** Despite government policy geared towards decentralization, it is likely that universities in rural areas will suffer the biggest student losses.

**Prestigious institution?** Whether national or private, the universities which consistently place highest in the ranking tables will have a competitive advantage as the student pool shrinks. Higher education rankings are available in English at: [www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/japan-university/2023](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/japan-university/2023)

**Prestigious department?** University departments which can carve out a niche to specialize in, may be able to maintain a stable student base.

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resources. Those who demonstrate the adaptability to embrace new teaching methods and technologies will be able to stay relevant and effective. In addition, knowledge of Japanese culture and language may help faculty who already reside in Japan to stave off competition coming in from other countries. Finally, Japanese universities often prioritize hiring faculty by number and quality of their publications. For a number of reasons, this is a measure of the significance of the individual's contribution in their field. It can impact the reputation and ranking of an institution, and in some cases research grants and funding opportunities are dependent upon an individual's publication record. For these reasons, regular publication is linked to marketability, and this may be even more necessary in an uncertain future.

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