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The impacts of internationalization in Japan: a capital-based analysis of international academics

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Abstract

Despite extensive efforts to internationalize Japan's higher education, the outcomes of these initiatives remain misaligned with the broader internationalization agenda, both in theory and practice. This study aims to inform future government policies on internationalization by examining the impacts of these efforts through the roles played by international academics in Japan. To provide a comprehensive understanding of their transformative yet complex roles, the study adopts a multi-stakeholder approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with international academics, international students, Japanese academics, university administrators, and Japanese local government officials. A capital-based perspective proposed by Bourdieu (2018) is applied in the study as a theoretical lens. The data analysis identifies four key forms of capital that international academics catalyze in Japan: cultural, social, economic, and symbolic. The forces from both the external environment and internal contexts contribute to the specific and multifaceted roles of international academics, which align with global trends while also addressing the localized internationalization needs in Japan. The study presents a significant analytical framework not only for recognizing the importance of international academics but also for advancing internationalization as a key driver of the global competitiveness of Japanese HEIs and the *Tabunkakyosei* initiatives within Japan's evolving global society, reinforcing existing evidence and challenging the notion that internationalization efforts lack meaningful practical contribution.

Keywords Impacts of internationalization · Roles of international academics · Contribution of international academics · Semi-structured interview · Japan

Introduction

The global landscape of higher education has undergone a profound transformation under the influence of economic dynamics and academic benchmarks fostered by the pervasive neoliberal paradigm (Altbach et al., 2011). This transformation has propelled the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide, a phenomenon to which Japan has

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responded with proactive measures aimed at bolstering its global presence since the 1980 s (Kitamura, 1989). Over the years, Japan has orchestrated a series of ambitious policies and strategies geared toward enhancing its international profile, marking a journey filled with significant milestones. For instance, Japan set an ambitious target in 1983 to accommodate 100,000 international students, signaling its commitment to fostering a diverse and vibrant academic community. Building on this momentum, the country doubled its efforts in 2008 to host 300,000 international students, underscoring its unwavering dedication to becoming a global hub for education and research excellence. Moreover, Japan embarked on a comprehensive framework named the Top Global University Project in 2014, marking a significant milestone in its quest for internationalization. These initiatives reflect Japan's proactive stance in engaging with the global academic community and fostering collaboration on a broader scale. Through these initiatives, Japan has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to enriching its higher education landscape with a plethora of cultural perspectives, academic insights, and innovative approaches, thus ensuring a fruitful journey toward academic excellence and global interconnectedness (Chen, 2022a, 2022b).

Despite the numerous efforts made toward the internationalization of Japan's higher education, the outcomes of those initiatives remain disconnected from the broader internationalization agenda, both theoretically and practically. It was not until last year that the Japanese government launched a new initiative, the Multicultural Campus Project Towards Social Impact (2024–2029), aimed at enhancing the impact and contributions of internationalization efforts within Japanese HEIs (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2024a). While existing literature has explored relevant issues through micro-level and nuanced analyses of specific projects or populations, it often falls short of comprehensively examining the broader impact and contributions of internationalization efforts from a bottom-up perspective. For instance, some scholars have concentrated on the (global) public good(s) of Japanese higher education through the lens of international students (Huang & Horiuchi, 2020; Huang et al., 2024) and their engagement dynamics with local communities (Li et al., 2025). Others have focused specifically on the impact of English-medium instruction (Rose & McKinley, 2018). International academics, who are at the forefront of these internationalization efforts, have been actively recruited by Japan to meet rising demand (Brotherhood et al., 2020). As of 2023, the total number of international academics at Japanese HEIs reached 9917, accounting for 5.10% of all faculty members (191,878)—an increase from 1.17% in 1983 (MEXT, 2024b). To offer insights to future governmental policies on internationalization, it is, therefore, urgent and imperative to examine the mechanisms through which international academics align with and respond to the practical outcomes of internationalization initiatives in Japan.

As such, the study examines the impacts of internationalization efforts by exploring the roles of international academics in Japan. The next section provides a comprehensive literature review, followed by a description of the methodology. The fourth section presents the data analysis, drawing on interview quotations. The study concludes by summarizing and discussing the key insights and acknowledging implications and limitations.

Literature review

The roles of international academics have been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry worldwide. In Anglophone countries, these studies often focus on academic diasporas who migrate to these regions, attracted by their scientific advancement and the opportunity to

access cutting-edge knowledge and skills (Marini & Xu, 2021), which can be broadly categorized into several thematic areas. A primary focus is on their role in advancing educational exchange. As educators, international academics are recognized for their ability to introduce distinctive perspectives and content, thereby enriching the academic discourse within their host institutions (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017). Another crucial theme is the unique and often pivotal positions that international academics occupy within their host institutions, particularly in driving scientific innovation. Research indicates that these scholars are frequently more engaged in research activities and exhibit higher productivity levels compared to their local counterparts (Knight, 2018). Their contributions significantly bolster the academic and research capabilities of their institutions, leading some to describe international academics as a vital source of strength and renewal for the scientific community (Stephan et al., 2016). Beyond their direct academic contributions, international academics play a transformative role in fostering a diverse and globally minded academic culture. Their presence within universities enriches cultural awareness and broadens international perspectives, contributing to a more inclusive and dynamic intellectual environment (Stephan et al., 2016). For instance, the increasing presence of Asian academics in Australian universities has notably amplified the influence of Asian perspectives and scholarship across the nation's academic landscape (Welch, 2021). Furthermore, international academics often bring with them extensive social capital, including valuable networks and resources that extend beyond national boundaries (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017). The integration of these scholars into host institutions frequently results in the expansion of global academic networks, facilitating international collaboration and knowledge exchange (Huang, 2021). This dynamic is well illustrated by Yang and Welch's (2010) study, which describes Chinese academics in Australia as a crucial link between the two countries, enhancing bilateral academic and scientific cooperation.

As the process of globalization and internationalization—extending beyond individual institutions or nations to align with global economic, cultural, and political dynamics—continues to evolve, the significance of international academics in non-Anglophone countries has increasingly garnered attention in scholarly research across various nations. Similar to their counterparts in Anglophone spheres, international academics in these countries have been recognized for their roles in fostering cross-cultural knowledge exchange, enhancing intercultural interactions, and improving the quality of higher education (Muhammad et al., 2021). Additionally, their presence is closely intertwined with the advancement and pursuit of internationalization initiatives within these countries. The growing emphasis on internationalization has been further influenced by global ranking organizations, which now consider the proportion of international students and academics as key indicators in assessing the international standing of HEIs. Consequently, the recruitment of international academics has emerged as a strategic approach for universities seeking to elevate their levels of internationalization and improve their global rankings (Stephan et al., 2016). This trend is evident in various countries, including China (Wu & Huang, 2018), Japan (Huang, 2018b), South Korea (Park, 2018), and Malaysia (Muhammad et al., 2021). In these contexts, international academics are not only valued for their contributions to teaching and research but also regarded as essential assets in advancing the internationalization goals of their institutions. Moreover, international academics have been identified as critical resources in driving academic progress, particularly through their ability to establish international collaborations and publish in prestigious international journals. These accomplishments are often challenging for local academics to achieve due to cultural and linguistic barriers (Muhammad et al., 2021). As such, international academics play a pivotal role in bridging these gaps, thereby contributing to the global visibility and academic reputation of their hosts.

In Japan, despite the implementation of policies and practices aimed at hiring international academics since the 1980 s, research on this population has been relatively limited. Starting with a study by Kitamura (1989), significant scholarly attention began to focus on international academics. Since then, studies in this area have grown in number, with several comprehensive investigations making notable contributions by examining the general outlooks, characteristics, and perceptions of international academics through large-scale surveys (Huang, 2018a, 2018b; Yonezawa et al., 2013). Building on these foundational studies, subsequent research has delved deeper into the experiences of international academics in Japan, often revealing a more nuanced and troubling reality. The prevailing literature frequently depicts these academics as marginalized and pessimistic about their positionality within Japanese universities. Empirical evidence has consistently highlighted their peripheral status, exacerbated by cultural and institutional biases. For instance, the perception of English as an American or British language rather than a global, multicultural tool for communication (Honma, 2008) has led to a preference for native English-speaking teachers. This bias has resulted in many international academics, regardless of their expertise and qualifications, being relegated primarily to English-related teaching positions (Chen, 2024; Fujimoto, 2019). While some international academics have been found to play important roles in knowledge dissemination and innovation (Huang, 2019), their participation in institutional decision-making and their career advancement opportunities remain severely limited (Brotherhood et al., 2020; Nishikawa, 2021). This marginalization often leads to their perception as tokenized symbols of internationalization—individuals whose presence is valued more for their foreign status and the visible diversity they bring to their institutions than for their academic contributions.

This situation highlights the paradoxical outcome of Japan's internationalization policies, where the roles of international academics—supposedly the driver of internationalization—remain severely constrained. This limitation reflects the challenges and unintended consequences of these internationalization initiatives within the Japanese context. Moreover, current research has largely focused on the experiences of international academics within HEIs, with insufficient attention paid to their involvement and engagement in local society and communities. This gap, therefore, suggests a need for the next phase of internationalization efforts to address the broader societal contributions of international academics, moving beyond the confines of HEIs.

Methodology

Research purpose and data collection

The study aims to examine the impacts of internationalization in Japan by exploring the roles of international academics in Japan. To provide a holistic understanding of the transformative yet critical roles these academics play, the study draws on the perspectives of a diverse range of stakeholders, including international academics, international students, Japanese academics, university administrators, and local government officials.

Parameters

The definition of international academics draws upon three primary criteria (Huang, 2018b). The first is those who work full-time at Japanese universities; second, those who do not have

Japanese citizenship or passport; and, third, those who finished primary and secondary school outside of Japan. As a result, individuals who worked part-time, had Japanese passports, and attended junior or junior high school in Japan were not included in the target demographics.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author, who was a former international student and is now an international academic at a Japanese university. The author's personal experiences and position within this context enabled a nuanced understanding of the research topic and helped establish rapport with participants. Furthermore, this shared identity as a researcher in Japan contributed to building trust and openness during the interviews. The project was introduced to participants as a study investigating the integration experiences and contributions of international academics in Japan. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and potential factors influencing participation, such as time limitations, concerns about anonymity, or lack of interest in the research topic, were considered.

The interviews conducted with international academics (labeled IA1–40) entailed common open-ended inquiries related to their professional and socio-cultural dynamics, e.g., their demographics, experiences, and career aspirations, between July and November 2020. Three distinct methods were employed to approach the participants of international academics. First, eligible respondents who consented to be interviewed from a nationwide survey conducted in Japan received invitations. Second, invitations were sent to possible participants based on the information found on the web pages of Japanese universities from various universities in Japan. Snowball sampling was used as the third means. Most of the participants identified through this method were introduced by other interviewees. Several individual and organizational characteristics were taken into consideration, including nationality, gender, position, discipline, and the location of their affiliations, to achieve a suitable variation among the participants, boosting the representativeness and breadth of opinions. The interviews were concluded upon reaching data saturation. Consequently, 40 volunteers were recruited, as shown in Table 1.

To obtain more accurate insights from the host perspective of international academics, between February and April 2024, ten in-person interviews were conducted, involving four international students (labeled IS1–4), two Japanese academics (JA1 and JA2), two university administrators (UA1 and UA2), and two local government officials engaged in international affairs (JL1 and JL2), as outlined in Table 2. Due to linguistic barriers and Japan's relatively homogenous cultural context, Japanese students are less likely to engage with international students and academics (Huang & Chen, 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, international students were selected as the target population for gathering the necessary data for this study. University administrators and local government representatives were purposively selected from sectors directly involved in international affairs, with recruitment achieved through direct invitations.

Data analysis

Analytical lens

The study employs a capital perspective proposed by Bourdieu (2018), which conceptualizes capital as “accumulated labor,” encompassing both tangible material assets and

Table 1 The outline of international academic interviewees

No	Affiliation	Area	Nationality	Age	Position	Discipline	Japanese family
IA1	National	Chugoku	Iran	30 s	Associate professor	Engineering	No
IA2	National	Chugoku	Bolivia	30 s	Assistant professor	Economy	No
IA3	National	Chugoku	India	30 s	Assistant professor	Physics	No
IA4	National	Chugoku	Vietnam	30 s	Assistant professor	Engineering	No
IA5	National	Chugoku	Korea	30 s	Assistant professor	Education	No
IA6	National	Chugoku	Iran	30 s	Assistant professor	Environment	No
IA7	Private	Kinki	China	30 s	Lecturer	Literature	No
IA8	National	Kanto	China	30 s	Assistant professor	Anthropology	No
IA9	National	Kanto	UK + Poland	30 s	Assistant professor	Economy	No
IA10	National	Touhoku	Brazil	40 s	Associate professor	Engineering	No
IA11	Local	Touhoku	Russia	30 s	Associate professor	Computer Science	No
IA12	National	Kyushu & Okinawa	Canada	60 s	Associate professor	Linguistics	Yes
IA13	Private	Kinki	China	30 s	Associate professor	Marketing	No
IA14	Private	Kyushu & Okinawa	UK	50 s	Associate professor	Education	Yes
IA15	Private	Kanto	USA	50 s	Professor	Literature	Yes
IA16	Local	Kyushu & Okinawa	USA	40 s	Associate professor	English	No
IA17	National	Chugoku	UK	60 s	Associate professor	Linguistics	No
IA18	Private	Kanto	Australia	40 s	Professor	Political Science	No
IA19	Local	Touhoku	UK	50 s	Associate professor	Education	Yes
IA20	Private	Kanto	Ireland	40 s	Lecturer	Computer Science	No
IA21	Private	Kanto	German	50 s	Professor	History	No
IA22	National	Chugoku	Thailand	30 s	Associate professor	Agriculture	No
IA23	Private	Kinki	UK	50 s	Professor	Literature	No
IA24	National	Chubu	Ireland	50 s	Professor/representative	Psychology	Yes
IA25	Private	Kinki	USA	40 s	Associate professor	English	No
IA26	National	Kinki	New Zealand	60 s	Professor	Biogeography	Yes

Table 1 (continued)

No	Affiliation	Area	Nationality	Age	Position	Discipline	Japanese family
IA27	Local	Chubu	USA	60 s	Associate professor	Linguistics	No
IA28	Private	Kyushu & Okinawa	USA	50 s	Lecturer	Linguistics	No
IA29	Private	Kanto	UK	50 s	Professor	Linguistics	No
IA30	National	Chugoku	USA	30 s	Assistant professor	Psychology	Yes
IA31	National	Chubu	China	40 s	Associate professor	Film Studies	No
IA32	National	Hokkaido	China	30 s	Assistant professor	Engineering	No
IA33	Local	Chugoku	USA	60 s	Professor	Linguistics	Yes
IA34	Local	Hokkaido	German	50 s	Professor/dean	Chemistry	Yes
IA35	Private	Hokkaido	UK	50 s	Associate professor	Education	Yes
IA36	Private	Hokkaido	Brazil	30 s	Lecturer	English	Yes
IA37	National	Kinki	Mexico	30 s	Lecturer	Chemistry	No
IA38	National	Hokkaido	Sri Lanka	40 s	Associate professor	Chemistry	Yes
IA39	Private	Kyushu & Okinawa	USA	50 s	Lecturer	Music	No
IA40	National	Chugoku	Korea	40 s	Associate professor	Engineering	No

/A international academic

Table 2 The outline of interviewees from the host's side

No	Nationality	Gender	Discipline/division
IS1	Cambodian	Male	STEM
IS2	Cambodian	Male	Interdisciplinary
IS3	Vietnamese	Female	Social Sciences
IS4	Vietnamese	Male	Social Sciences
JA1	Japanese	Male	Graduate School of Humanity and Social Sciences
JA2	Japanese	Female	Graduate School of Humanity and Social Sciences
UA1	Japanese	Male	Vice-Executive Director of Global Project
UA2	Japanese	Male	Executive Vice-President for Global Initiatives
JL1	Japanese	Male	Citizen Affairs Division (welfare organization)
JL2	Japanese	Female	Citizen Affairs Division (government)

IS international student, *JA* Japanese academic, *UA* university administrator, *JL* Japanese local government officials

intangible cultural resources. This framework allows for an analysis of how various forms of capital—cultural, social, economic, and symbolic—are acquired, deployed, and valued within specific social contexts. This accumulation and distribution of capital determine an individual's position within social hierarchies, shaping privilege and power dynamics. Cultural capital manifests in various forms, encompassing academic qualifications conferred by institutions, cultural experiences, and work histories accumulated through prior engagements, proficiency in languages acquired through diverse contexts, and tangible assets such as books and equipment. Social capital consists of social networks or relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, legitimized by family, class, and group memberships, which provide access to social advantages. Economic capital, the most easily convertible, refers to financial resources such as income, property, material possessions, and savings. Finally, symbolic capital represents the power derived from mobilizing these forms of capital, reflected in social status, class position, and other markers of dominance.

This multi-dimensional understanding of capital reveals how individuals navigate and secure legitimacy within social structures by accumulating and converting different forms of capital. Bourdieu's framework is highly relevant for understanding implicit power dynamics and domination within societal hierarchies, and it has been increasingly adopted by scholars in human resource management (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011), migration studies (Joy et al., 2020), and higher education (Braun Štřelcová et al., 2022), to elucidate the experiences of migrant capital in host nations, examining how migrants' capital is valued or devalued, how they respond to contextual dynamics, and how they impact or are impacted by their host societies. For instance, some scholars have characterized citizenship as a form of capital that shapes their processes of integration (Bauder, 2008). Others have focused on language, identified as a form of cultural capital, highlighting its critical role in shaping occupational engagement through the lens of social power relations (Huot et al., 2020). Additionally, the relationship between early-career academics' transnational mobility networks and their development of academic social capital has been examined (Schaer et al., 2021). Moreover, research has also verified the reciprocal relationship between occupational engagement and symbolic capital, demonstrating how professional activities reinforce their social recognition and value (Huot, 2016).

International academics, as globalized migrants, align closely with Bourdieu's theory (Braun Střelcová et al., 2022). Therefore, to examine the multifaceted roles of international academics in their host country, Japan, this study employs Bourdieu's capital theory as its analytical framework. While this application diverges to some extent from Bourdieu's original formulation, which emphasizes power relations and the reproduction of social inequality, the selective and instrumental use of the theory remains a valid and effective analytical tool for this study. It allows for an exploration of how international academics, as bearers of various forms of capital (e.g., economic, cultural, social, and symbolic), are recognized, utilized, and valued within the institutional and social context of Japan.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely adopted qualitative data analysis method in the social sciences, employed to identify significant patterns or themes within datasets. This approach allows for a detailed and comprehensive synthesis of key elements, offering a "thick description" of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this study, the six-phase thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012) was employed. The steps involved (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

Findings

In examining the roles of international academics, a diverse array of examples and perspectives emerged from international academics, international students, and various Japanese stakeholders. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, this section analyzes and highlights how international academics are perceived as forms of capital within Japan's context, providing a deeper understanding of international academics' role in shaping Japan's academic and societal landscape.

International academics as cultural capital

Cultural capital is the most frequently mentioned form associated with international academics in Japan, underscoring their role as carriers of diverse professional knowledge, expertise, and cultural perspectives. As highly educated individuals with experiences from various cultural and educational contexts, international academics are uniquely positioned to introduce fresh insights into the Japanese higher education system. They bring not only specialized disciplinary knowledge but also the cultural richness and intellectual diversity acquired through their exposure to multiple national and academic environments. These competencies enable them to serve as conduits for transmitting a wide array of cultural and professional capital to both their students, as highlighted by IS1 ("many international faculty in my department are very professional and globally recognized"), and their Japanese colleagues, as noted by JA1 ("they bring both professional and cultural insights to our university").

One striking aspect of their contribution is the frequent use of international resources such as textbooks, case studies, and contemporary scholarly debates from overseas in their teaching practices. This pedagogical approach aligns closely with the objectives of the Japanese government, which is committed to cultivating global human resources by

integrating international perspectives into its education system. Incorporating the latest international discourses and examples, international academics enable students to engage with cutting-edge knowledge and skills that are not limited to a purely local or national context. This is particularly significant in rapidly evolving fields driven by globalization, such as technology, business, and science, as highlighted by IA32, a specialist in Engineering, that “Like our computer science program, the knowledge we cultivate is globally relevant.” Moreover, beyond technical knowledge, students also acquire valuable cross-cultural literacy—an essential skill in today’s interconnected world. Learning about international practices and comparative frameworks enables students to develop a more nuanced understanding of global issues, further preparing them to navigate multicultural work environments in the future, which was emphasized by both international students (IS2: “I think they can help us to have more international perspectives”) and Japanese academics (JA2: “They are perfect for cultivating international talent in Japan”). IA13, an academic from marketing, further emphasized this point, stating:

The textbooks I use for my classes are all from overseas, from Harvard to ordinary state universities [...] So what the students learn is not limited to the Japanese market but all over the world outside of Japan. (IA13)

The roles of international academics extend beyond student learning outcomes to influence Japanese academics and the broader university ecosystem—an interconnected network of individuals, organizations, and resources that collectively support teaching, research, and social contributions while shaping institutional operations and culture (Bock et al., 2020). Although international and Japanese academics often occupy different work roles, their collaborative efforts—ranging from informal interactions in day-to-day academic life to more formal settings such as faculty meetings and committee deliberations—promote mutual learning and cross-cultural exchange. These interactions are critical in broadening the horizons of Japanese academics, who, through their exposure to diverse ways of thinking, can benefit from new perspectives on research, pedagogy, and even institutional governance. Such exchanges foster an environment where alternative viewpoints are welcomed, contributing to a more dynamic and globally responsive academic culture. JA1, a Japanese professor from social sciences, provided the following comment:

It’s good to have international faculty. Personally, it’s fun. Rather than the only Japanese, it’s more fun because we have more diverse perspectives. Diversity is very important. And in a sense, we have more various kinds of ideas. And it has a good impact on our discussion and decision-making. (JA1)

Furthermore, the influence of international academics often transcends the individual level, permeating the administrative and institutional frameworks of Japanese universities. As international academics engage in the broader governance of their institutions—whether through participation in decision-making bodies, curricular committees, or strategic planning sessions—their presence helps to facilitate institutional changes toward greater openness and internationalization. This is particularly significant in Japan, where universities are actively pursuing policies of internationalization to enhance their global standing and attract talent from around the world. The subtle yet profound cultural shifts brought about by international academics are reflected in more inclusive and globally oriented administrative practices, which are essential for the successful integration of internationalization policies into the core mission of HEIs. The impact of these changes has been corroborated by the perspectives of a majority of the interviewees, who attested to the positive transformations in both academic culture and institutional structure.

I think with more foreigners coming, the Japanese people will know more about different cultures, and they will become more open. But they already have their histories for long history, so it takes time to change. (IA4)

The roles of international academics as cultural capital extend beyond HEIs into the broader societal context in Japan, where their presence contributes significantly to the cultural diversification of society often described as monocultural and exclusionary (Chen, 2022a). The incorporation and retention of international academics, who actively participate in local Japanese communities, play a crucial role in fostering a more international and cross-cultural society, which aligns closely with the concept of *Tabunkakyosei* (multiculturalism). This is particularly true for individuals from countries with minimal cultural similarities, such as those from Western nations. Their dual role underscores their importance not only within the academic sphere but also in sustaining Japan's social fabric and addressing the challenges posed by increasing global migration flows through societal contributions. JL1, a Japanese local government official, emphasized the following:

Japan, as an island nation with a long history of accepting foreigners, has seen this trend accelerate in recent years due to its declining population. With the increasing number of international students and foreign residents, cross-cultural exchanges have become more frequent. The principle of *Tabunkakyosei* must be emphasized. Promoting mutual understanding between diverse cultures is essential for fostering a more inclusive and globally integrated society. (JL1)

In sum, international academics contribute significantly to both the academic and cultural dimensions as cultural capital. By facilitating the transfer of cutting-edge knowledge and fostering cross-cultural competence among students, while also enriching the professional environment for Japanese academics and influencing institutional governance, international academics play a key role in advancing the internationalization of Japanese universities. Furthermore, their societal impact, particularly in light of Japan's demographic challenges, underscores the broader importance of their role in fostering a more multicultural and diverse society.

International academics as social capital

In addition to cultural capital, another significant form of capital that emerged from the narratives of the interviewees is social capital, a crucial element in understanding the broader impact of international academics in Japan. Social capital, in this context, refers to the international networks and professional bonds that international academics maintain with their home countries, as well as with other institutions across the globe. These transnational connections are not only vital for the professional development of the international academics themselves but are also highly valued by their host institutions in Japan (Huang, 2018b). It is often an explicit expectation that international academics leverage their global networks to create academic and research linkages, thereby acting as conduits between their host universities and a wider international academic community. This social capital plays a multifaceted role in enhancing both the scientific performance and reputation of Japanese universities. Through collaborative research projects, joint publications, and participation in international conferences, these academics can maintain high levels of academic visibility and productivity, which in turn enhances their standing in both the Japanese academic environment and the global scholarly community. As IA40 emphasized,

“International collaboration is important, helping me to be recognized both in Japan and internationally.”

This, however, is not limited to the personal gain of the academics themselves. The international networks cultivated by these academics provide valuable opportunities for their Japanese students, who, through these connections, gain exposure to overseas institutions, diverse perspectives, and potential career pathways beyond Japan. For instance, international academics often facilitate student exchanges, internships, and research collaborations with universities abroad, thereby expanding the academic and professional horizons of their students. IA32, specialized in Engineering, noted as follows:

X University is a very small university with very few faculties. However, it is ranked very high. Many international faculty have been hired there. Because of their connections and ambitions, students there often go overseas for international training and exchanges. Consequently, students there are well welcomed in the job market because firstly, students there are very good at English [...] Secondly, their professional knowledge is solid, and they have learned the latest computer technology which is in line with the international standard. (IA32)

Moreover, the influence of this social capital extends beyond individual students, contributing to the broader internationalization efforts of Japanese universities. By creating and maintaining robust academic partnerships with overseas institutions, international academics help to position their host universities as more globally connected and competitive. This is particularly important in the context of Japan’s ongoing efforts to internationalize its higher education system, where establishing international networks and fostering global collaborations are seen as critical components of institutional prestige and global rankings (MEXT, 2022).

All of our academic activities are conducted under the name of our university. In the case of international collaborations, the university’s name is prominently highlighted, significantly contributing to enhancing its international reputation. (IA13)

Therefore, the social capital of international academics serves as a strategic asset not only for their personal career advancement but also for the academic and professional development of their students and the global outreach of their host institutions. This highlights the reciprocal benefits of employing international academics in Japan, where their global networks contribute to the creation of more well-rounded students and more internationally connected universities, thus fostering an environment conducive to both academic excellence and international collaboration.

International academics as economic capital

Moreover, Japan is currently facing a significant demographic challenge, characterized by a declining youth population and an aging society. This demographic shift has critical implications for the country’s labor force, which is gradually shrinking, leading to concerns about the long-term sustainability of Japan’s economy and its capacity to maintain a robust welfare system. In this context, international academics have been characterized as economic capital, actively contributing to the nation’s economic development in various ways. For instance, the role of international academics in Japan’s broader economic framework, such as through tax contributions, cannot be overlooked, even if the impact is relatively minimal. As residents working in Japan, they are subject to the same tax obligations

as Japanese citizens, including income tax, local taxes, and contributions to social security systems, as highlighted below by IA13, a Chinese academic from marketing. Despite their relatively small number compared to other categories of foreign residents—2,302,587 foreign workers (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2025) and 336,708 international students in 2024 (JASSO, 2025)—the financial contribution of international academics to Japan’s welfare system, though limited, warrants recognition, particularly in light of the growing strain an aging population places on public resources such as healthcare and pensions. By contributing to the tax base, international academics help alleviate some of the financial strain caused by the growing number of retirees relative to the shrinking working-age population. UA1, a Japanese university administrator, further emphasized that “the fiscal contributions of international academics as members of the labor force bolster the nation’s capacity to provide essential services and public goods for its citizens.”

And socio-economically, yes. In Japan, where there are fewer children, I pay taxes on my income. It’s an important contribution to Japan’s social welfare and labor system. (IA13)

Furthermore, the presence of international academics plays a critical role in supporting Japan’s broader efforts to internationalize its economic sector. As people with diverse cultural backgrounds, international academics bring a wealth of knowledge and perspectives that contribute to Japan’s economic competitiveness in the global market. Their ability to leverage international networks and engage in cross-border collaborations catalyzes innovation, driving significant advancements in research and technology. This is particularly evident in the STEM fields. Such collaborations foster global partnerships that extend beyond academia, opening doors for international trade and business opportunities, as noted by IA34, a Dean specializing in Chemistry.

It’s always better to have international collaborations than just domestic ones in the medical, science, and engineering fields. You need input from abroad [...] I do a lot of work with outside institutions, you know, international collaborations [...] Inviting international researchers to Japan and so creating more future opportunities for Japan [...] many of my collaborators overseas established collaborations with Japanese companies later. (IA34)

Moreover, collaboration between academia and industry has also been noted in driving Japan’s economic development by fostering innovation and addressing societal challenges. International academics with STEM backgrounds play a pivotal role in this process by introducing diverse perspectives and conducting cutting-edge research. Their contributions not only attract investments and foster partnerships, as highlighted by IA22 from agricultural sciences, but also, as exemplified by IA37—a lecturer specializing in chemistry planning to establish his own company—occasionally lead to the creation of new industries by leveraging their professional expertise. Their expertise and active engagement help bridge the gap between research and practical applications, thereby strengthening Japan’s economic development. This, in turn, “enhances the nation’s innovation potential and competitiveness globally,” as emphasized by JL2, a Japanese local civil servant from the Citizen Affairs Division.

With Japanese companies, for example, food companies, they have collaboration with us. We do experiments together for 1 year; they give us some funding. (IA22)
My plan now is to expand my knowledge and my expertise [...] I want to make my company. I went to get a patent for a mighty fine by world generation device. So next,

I want to expand the commercialization of my product and hopefully, use my university to do that. (IA37)

International academics in Japan represent a critical form of economic capital that transcends the academic sphere, making substantial contributions to the country's economic and social systems. Their integration into Japan's workforce contributes to the nation's tax base, providing essential support for public services and infrastructure. This is particularly significant given Japan's demographic challenges, which present considerable hurdles to sustained economic growth.

International academics as symbolic capital

The final form of capital attributed to international academics is symbolic capital. This refers to the power and prestige that international academics gain or inherit through the accumulation and strategic deployment of other forms of capital, such as cultural, social, and economic capital, which are legitimized and valued by society. The most frequently mentioned contribution of international academics as symbolic capital is the immediate impact on the academic and societal environment toward internationalization. The symbolic capital of international academics, particularly those with non-traditional Asian appearances, serves as a symbol of the institution's commitment to global engagement and its capacity to attract top-tier talent from abroad (Chen & Huang, 2024). This symbolic power enhances the university's reputation, positioning it as a forward-thinking institution capable of competing globally. This prestige, in turn, boosts the overall appeal of the institution to prospective students, staff, and partners, further enhancing the internationalization agenda of HEIs in Japan.

The university, what they care about the most is reputation, which is measured by our scientific output and our presence. (IA11)

Furthermore, the perceived higher employability of students under their supervision was also identified. This stems from the broader assumption that students working closely with international academics are likely to develop advanced skills, particularly in areas such as English proficiency and cross-cultural competency. Given that much of Japan's educational and professional landscape remains heavily dominated by the Japanese language, being supervised by an international academic is seen as an indicator of a student's ability to operate effectively in international environments. This, in turn, enhances their employment prospects, particularly in multinational corporations and globally oriented industries. The symbolic association between international academics and global competency reflects the increasing value placed on cross-cultural literacy and language skills in Japan's evolving labor market. In a world where globalization continues to accelerate, employers increasingly seek candidates who can navigate diverse cultural contexts and communicate across linguistic barriers. As shared by IS4, students who have been supervised by international academics are often perceived as "possessing a distinct advantage in both their academic training and their readiness to engage with global challenges." The international exposure and cultural knowledge these students acquire under the mentorship of international academics thus serve as symbolic markers of their preparedness for roles in internationally focused organizations.

I have master's students; they did job hunting. When they say, my professor is a foreigner, it's quite appealing to companies. Because the student already is working in

an international environment. The student is already used to working with foreigners. (IA37)

The symbolic capital of international academics serves in Japan as both a marker of academic excellence and a reflection of broader institutional and societal values around internationalization, cross-cultural competency, and global engagement. Their mere presence signals a strong endorsement of their affiliations' global credentials, further legitimizing their standing in the competitive landscape of international higher education. In this regard, international academics not only contribute to the intellectual and cultural life of the university but also play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of their affiliations' global stature. They serve as informal ambassadors of internationalization and scientific advancement through their everyday contributions, which extend beyond formally structured activities to include the dissemination of their students' capabilities and the broader internationalization framework.

Discussion

The multifaceted roles of international academics as various forms of capital have been identified in the study, underpinned by external and internal contextual forces that warrant thorough discussion. Globalization and internationalization of higher education, external to Japan's higher education system, play a pivotal role in driving the contributions of international academics to the country. Firstly, scientific research and innovation on a global scale have long been essential for HEIs in assessing their international standing. They serve as key indicators of a university's capacity to engage with and contribute to the broader academic and societal landscape, reinforcing its global influence and competitiveness. Japan's relatively stagnant scientific output in comparison to other countries has intensified the need for globally excellent researchers and international collaborations (MEXT, 2023). This analysis clarifies both the underlying reasons and the mechanisms through which international academics, leveraging their professional expertise, drive scientific innovation by integrating international educational resources into Japan's higher education system as cultural capital. This trend aligns with similar developments in other East Asian contexts, such as China, where the incorporation of global knowledge into domestic education by international academics has been documented (Xu et al., 2022). Furthermore, the analysis underscores how international academics foster cross-border partnerships as social capital, thereby enhancing Japan's global scientific presence, as noted by Huang (2018b).

Additionally, spurred by internationalization, diversity has become a significant concern for Japan's HEIs. This has led to efforts to attract international talent, including both international students and academics, as these groups are crucial indicators of international league tables. As a mono-ethnic state, Japan may struggle to achieve diversity without incorporating these populations (Morita, 2018). In this context, international academics fulfill a dual role. As cultural capital, they introduce international perspectives and insights that contribute to comprehensive internationalization (Chen & Huang, 2024). Simultaneously, as symbolic capital, international academics serve as tangible representations of the internationalization level and the commitment of Japanese HEIs to global engagement, as emphasized by the participants. In doing so, they contribute to fostering a more inclusive academic environment and enhancing the acceptance of international talent (Chen, 2022a), as noted by both international students and Japanese academic participants in the study.

The impacts of factors internal to Japan's context on stimulating the contributions of international academics cannot be underestimated. Firstly, Japan faces a shrinking population due to a declining birth rate and an aging demographic, which has resulted in fewer domestic students entering universities. This demographic shift places significant pressure on HEIs to maintain enrollment numbers and financial viability (MEXT, 2016). In response, Japan has undertaken political initiatives to attract international students, aiming to sustain university enrollment and vibrancy, ensure financial stability, and encourage their retention as part of the domestic labor force. However, a limited number of Japanese academics are adequately equipped to effectively engage with international activities, creating an urgent need to attract more international academics (Huang, 2018b). Thus, international academics, as cultural capital by bringing diverse perspectives and cultural insights and incorporating international educational resources, are expected to play a crucial role in enhancing the global learning environment (Huang, 2018b). In particular, their role as cultural capital contributes not only to the recruitment and support of international students but also to the sustainability of academic programs, internationalization initiatives, and the development of a more globally competitive labor force in Japan.

Moreover, the economic pressures faced by some Japanese universities may have also underscored the role of international academics as economic capital. Building on neoliberal principles and applying new public management approaches, the Japanese government implemented the Incorporation of National Universities in 2004. This reform granted Japanese national universities more autonomous legal status, enabling them to independently establish detailed management mechanisms. To enhance international competitiveness and increase the economic gains of national universities (Hatakenaka, 2004), the Japanese government simultaneously reduced the operational grant—the primary revenue source for national universities—by 1% annually. Consequently, like their domestic Japanese counterparts, international academics can be redefined as “individual entrepreneurial actors” (Davies & Bansel, 2007). As highlighted in this study, their proactive engagement in both domestic and international research collaborations, as well as in industry-academia partnerships, further reinforces this characterization. Therefore, their contributions as economic capital are not limited to securing funding and resources for their institutions; they are also involved in efforts that may support regional and national economic development. As such, the forces from both the external environment and internal contexts contribute to the specific and multifaceted roles of international academics, which align with global trends while also addressing the localized internationalization needs in Japan.

Conclusions

Given the increasing focus on the impact of internationalization in Japan, this study explores the multifaceted roles and contributions of international academics through a capital-based analysis. Drawing on the perspectives of a diverse range of stakeholders—including international academics, international students, Japanese academics, university administrators, and local government officials—the study identifies four key forms of capital that international academics catalyze in Japan: cultural, social, economic, and symbolic. While existing scholarship has extensively examined various aspects of international academics in Japan through micro-level approaches to their demographics and professional roles (Huang, 2018b), integration experiences (Chen, 2022b), satisfaction (Huang & Chen, 2024), and retention (Chen, 2024; Chen & Chen, 2024), this study adopts a broader

perspective to highlight the multifaceted roles of international academics in addressing the impacts of Japan's internationalization efforts. The study presents a significant analytical framework not only for recognizing the importance of international academics but also for advancing internationalization as a key driver of the global competitiveness of Japanese HEIs and the *Tabunkakyosei* initiatives within Japan's evolving global society.

The multifaceted roles played by international academics within Japan's higher education system in this study are extensively documented in the existing literature from other contexts. These roles underscore their pivotal contributions across various dimensions, including advancing research and innovation, fostering a more globalized educational environment, engaging in international networking and collaborative research projects, serving as informal ambassadors for their institutions, and enhancing global reputation and visibility (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017). Their contributions as cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital highlight their indispensable role in advancing the goals of internationalization within Japan's higher education system.

Additionally, despite the internationalization initiatives implemented in Japan's higher education sectors, the contributions of international academics have extended beyond the academic sphere to the broader local community and Japanese society. Their roles include active engagement in academia-industry collaboration, integrating international culture into local society, and contributing to the revitalization of Japan's economy as both cultural and economic capital. Although their current numbers remain limited, resulting in a relatively minor impact at this stage, these contributions are expected to expand in scope and significance as internationalization initiatives continue to advance. These aspects have been rarely explored in previous studies, particularly within the context of Japan, underscoring the significant impact of internationalization on local communities and society. Given the increasing emphasis on the third mission of higher education, there is a pressing need for closer alignment between internationalization and social responsibility agendas through the framework of the internationalization of higher education (Cai & Leask, 2024). The study is highly consistent with Jones et al. (2021), which encourages HEIs to think both globally and locally through an internationalization lens, fostering deeper academic engagement while addressing societal challenges more effectively.

Criticism of internationalization policies over the decades has often highlighted their reactive nature and inclination toward nationalism while lacking comprehensive international perspectives, long-term strategic planning, and meaningful impact (Bamberger & Morris, 2024). Although theoretical shortcomings in the policy-making process behind these initiatives in Japan are evident—such as an overemphasis on a limited number of top universities (Rappleye & Vickers, 2015)—the assumption that internationalization efforts lack meaningful practical contributions warrants reexamination. This study underscores the paramount importance of internationalization efforts in both the academic community and local society in Japan. The findings demonstrate how these efforts in Japan contribute significantly to enhancing the institutional capacities of universities supported by internationalization initiatives, fostering global engagement, and supporting local societal development, reinforcing existing evidence (Cai & Leask, 2024; Xu, 2024).

Several implications can be drawn from this study. Firstly, given the broad-ranging interactions of international academics across both academic and social spheres, effectively harnessing their contributions requires a holistic approach. This involves integrating institutional reforms, social-cultural strategies, and individual efforts to create an environment that enables their full participation and maximizes their potential contributions. Comprehensive, multi-level interventions must be designed and implemented to position international academics as indispensable assets within Japan's higher education and broader

societal framework. Moreover, while this study has analyzed the contributions of international academics through the lens of their role as vital capital within Japan's higher education landscape, future research should explore the impact of internationalization from other perspectives to understand its broader contribution in Japan.

Four limitations of the study should be noted. First, the small sample size among students and Japanese stakeholders may limit the diversity and representativeness of perspectives. Additionally, the reliance on a subset of interview data and the exclusion of part-time international academics, due to the technical challenges in accessing this population, may limit the depth of analysis and hinder the broader generalizability of the findings. Further research with a larger and more balanced dataset is needed. Moreover, despite accounting for variations among international academic participants, it is important to acknowledge that only a limited number of top universities in Japan have actively engaged in internationalization initiatives. As a result, the findings of this study may be primarily applicable to these institutions. Additionally, the uneven regional distribution of internationalization efforts should be recognized as a potential limitation. Finally, the study's use of Bourdieu's capital theory selectively and instrumentally, rather than in its full sociological scope, may limit its ability to capture the relational and structural dynamics of power. This narrowed application may overlook deeper issues such as how capital is produced, legitimized, and contested within institutional and social hierarchies.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Official ethical approvals for this study were obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Research Institute for Higher Education, Hiroshima University, Japan, and the Research Ethics Review Committee at the University of Osaka, Japan (Reference Number: R6-004). All participants provided informed consent before their participation.

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

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