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Beyond Borders: The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Nagoya University's International Programs

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Abstract: This paper provides a brief overview of the international programs at Nagoya University and outlines the characteristics of the Japan-in-Asia Cultural Studies Program (JACS). Besides, the pandemic's impact on international admissions at Nagoya University is discussed. Further, within the context of JACS, an attempt is made to explore the immense challenges the Japanese government's restrictions on international travel posed for both students and faculty. It reflects on the lessons learned while navigating the complexities of the program amid a global crisis.

Introduction

Conversations in Nagoya University's Japan-in-Asia Cultural Studies Program (JACS) began to center around the novel coronavirus in January 2020, way before the infamous cruise ship Diamond Princess—then the largest cluster of the virus outside China—was quarantined in the port of Yokohama. This awareness was largely thanks to students from mainland China and Hong Kong, one of whom accurately predicted a global spread at a time when few people seemed to be taking the threat seriously. Around four turbulent years later, it is time to pause and look back on the extraordinary challenge the pandemic posed to students and instructors of the program, and to the international programs at Nagoya University (NU) as a whole. Rather than presenting the results of formal research on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on international programs in Japanese university education, this essay offers an anecdotal account from the perspective of someone who had the privilege of leading JACS for many years.

I will begin by providing a brief overview of the international programs at NU and outline the characteristics of the JACS program. Subsequently, I will delve into the pandemic's impact on international admissions at Nagoya University. Within the context of JACS, explore the immense challenges the Japanese government's restrictions on international travel posed for both students and faculty. Finally, I will wrap up the essay by reflecting on the lessons learned while navigating the complexities of our program amid a global crisis.

The Invisible Struggles of International Programs

In 2011, Nagoya University initiated English-taught degree programs tailored for high-achieving students from abroad and graduates of international schools in Japan. Beginning with programs in the natural sciences, NU's international offerings soon expanded to include programs in the social sciences and the humanities. The JACS program is focused on the study of "Japan-in-Asia" from the perspective of modern history, literature, and cinema and visual culture studies. The undergraduate section welcomed its first cohort of students in 2014, while the graduate program commenced a year later. To date, students from approximately 30 countries have

enrolled in the program which, thanks to its relatively small size, is distinguished by close interaction between students and instructors.

G30 UG Programs Applicants, Interviewed, Passed, Enrollees (2011-2023)

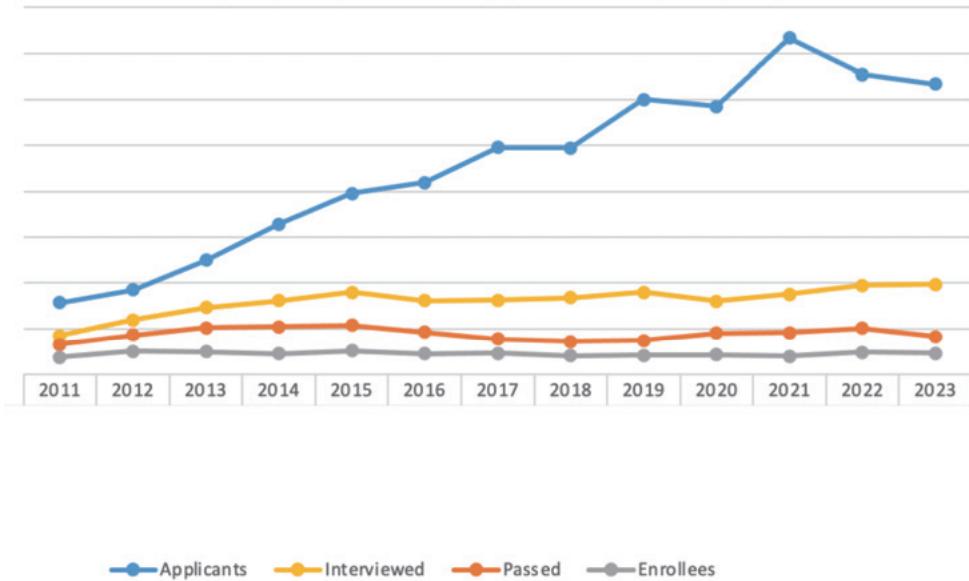


Table 1. NU G30 undergraduate admission trends (exact numbers were erased for reasons of confidentiality)

As table 1 indicates, the overall number of applicants grew steadily since the initiation of the international tier, experienced a slight drop in 2020, and reached a preliminary peak in 2021. To interpret the graph, it is important to note that the international programs operate on a different timeline from the Japanese programs, commencing in October rather than April. Considering that applications typically start around 10 months before enrolment, it is clear the decrease in 2020 was unrelated to the pandemic. Conversely, the all-time high in the number of applications occurred at the height of pandemic restrictions. Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that the number of enrollees does not show any significant change, even though, as explained in more detail below, foreign students were not allowed to enter Japan for a prolonged period of time and had to study online. Speaking only for the applications to the JACS program, no significant change in the quality of the applications, or the countries of origin can be observed either. Fearing that students might not accept the offer even if accepted due to the difficulties entering the country, we slightly increased the number of interviews, yet these fears proved unfounded. During the pandemic, we achieved an acceptance rate of 100% for the first time, suggesting that students who applied despite the

circumstances were likely more determined to make Japan their study destination than in non-pandemic years where top students tend to consider Japan as one out of many options.

Since the last pandemic measures were lifted only in May 2023, it is premature to speculate about the long-term implications of the Japanese border closures for the country's attractiveness as a study destination. Similarly, assessing the impact of the reduced participation of AO staff in on-site promotional events worldwide around the globe will not be a straightforward task. Although the current admission data seem to suggest that Nagoya University's international programs have weathered the storm of the coronavirus pandemic quite well, it is important to understand that these figures, while shedding light on recruitment and program sustainability, only tell part of the story. To get a fuller picture, we need to shift our focus to the experiences of the students and faculty already part of the program. Needless to say, their challenges went beyond what these numbers can reveal.

Pandemic Policies, or Closing the Door

Compared to Japan's immediate neighbor, China, and many Western countries, Japan adopted a relatively lenient approach to pandemic measures. While the government encouraged social distancing, mask-wearing, and other preventive measures, there were no strict lockdowns or penalties for non-compliance. However, the domestic reliance on non-binding "requests" stood in stark contrast to the series of stringent border control measures. Unlike in other OECD countries, these measures were applied based on citizenship rather than residency. As a result, foreign residents of Japan were treated no differently from tourists, and foreigners within Japan became latently associated with contagion.

Below is a list of measures that most directly affected the JACS program and the other international programs at Nagoya University:

- 2020 April: Entry and re-entry ban for foreigners, including residents of Japan; no new visas issued.
- 2020 September: Established foreign residents in Japan allowed to re-enter; no new visas issued.
- 2020 December: Permission granted for new student arrivals.
- 2021 January: Discontinuation of new student arrivals.
- 2021 Summer: Total entry ban for arrivals from India and Bangladesh due to the spread of the Delta variant; ban included residents of Japan.
- 2021 December: Revocation of a special provision allowing individuals with professor visa to enter the country due to emergence of Omicron variant.
- 2022 Spring: Universities allowed to act as guarantors for new professor hires.
- 2022 April: Permission granted for new student arrivals.

Due to these border control measures, both international students and foreign faculty at NU encountered numerous challenges that significantly affected their academic pursuits and overall well-being. For instance, the initial restrictions on re-entry to Japan compelled students who had departed during the spring break to

continue paying rent and utility fees for their empty apartments, all while grappling with remote learning across time zones.

Among the JACS students who were stuck outside Japan during this time, two found themselves in particularly difficult situations. One of them was scheduled to submit their MA thesis at the end of June 2020. Without physical access to libraries and archives and having left their computer left in Japan during what was originally intended as a brief vacation away, this student had to make last-minute modifications to their thesis topic. To add to the challenge, they had to write their thesis using only a tablet. The other case worth mentioning here involves a MEXT research student who had just been admitted to the MA program for the fall of 2021. Like other universities in Japan, Nagoya University initially required physical presence for enrollment. With the re-entry ban showing no signs of lifting and stringent exit restrictions prevailing in the student's home country, the only viable option seemed to be declining the program offer. Ironically, a mere six weeks later, the university revised its stance, allowing online enrollment. This shift, along with subsequent approval from MEXT for online class attendance, highlighted the institutional challenges of providing a flexible response to unprecedented global uncertainty.

The 2020 fall term presented additional challenges as new students were unable to enter Japan. While the spring term had already transitioned to fully online classes, the dynamic shifted significantly for both students and faculty who were navigating discussion-based teaching without ever having met in person. This struggle was compounded for students in Europe and the US, forced to attend classes in the middle of the night due to the time difference. For some, this continued until May 2022, when they could finally come to Japan. The situation remained largely unchanged for the 2021 batch. Faced with these circumstances, some of the students studying online from abroad contemplated dropping out or exploring alternatives, such as enrolling at a South Korean university, as the country allowed foreigners to enter after a strictly monitored quarantine period. While we managed to persuade regular students to stay, some research students withdrew from their scholarships due to the persistent border closures.

The initial total re-entry ban and the prolonged border closures for new students created significant anxiety among foreign students and faculty. The emergence of the Delta variant in 2021 and the subsequent sudden ban on all entries from India and Bangladesh, regardless of visa status, underscored the risks associated with leaving Japan, even for a short period. This situation left students and faculty "stranded in Japan," with some even refraining from visiting gravely ill family members abroad due to the fear of being unable to return. Consequently, JACS experienced an increase in serious mental health issues, with the shortage of counseling services in English adding to the burden on foreign faculty.

Another significant challenge arose when a core faculty member left Nagoya University and Japan in 2021, partly due to pandemic-related factors. Although approval for hiring a successor was promptly given, complications arose when, due to the emergence of the Omicron variant, a special provision that had allowed foreign individuals with a professor visa to enter the country was revoked in

December 2021. Consequently, the new colleague, originally slated to assume the position from January 2022, faced entry restrictions. Aligning with the initial policy for student enrollment, Nagoya University mandated physical presence in Japan on the first day of employment. However, since this was now impossible, NU indefinitely postponed the new colleague's employment, despite it being beyond their control, revealing a surprising lack of concern regarding financial and reputational consequences. In the face of no results from numerous petitions to the Foreign Ministry, Education Ministry, and Japanese Consulate in the new professor's home country, extensive consultations with the NU management eventually led to the recognition of special circumstances. The professor was ultimately hired from mid-February while still abroad, and received permission to enter Japan in April 2022.

The Extra-long Pandemic: Special Challenges for International Programs

Like other universities in Japan and across the world, NU relied on remote teaching for approximately one year starting in spring 2020, with a few exceptions for lab classes in the sciences. By spring 2021, rules were significantly relaxed, and campus life resumed to some degree. However, for international programs, online-only teaching continued due to the considerable number of students still residing outside the country and the lack of facilities suited for conducting hybrid classes over an extended period. JACS only returned to in-person teaching after two years, in spring 2022, when it became evident that the last students remaining outside Japan would finally be granted permission to enter the country after Golden Week.

While meaningful discussions were possible even in an online format thanks to the small class sizes, the interaction between student and faculty, as well as among students, was limited to our designated class hours. Especially in the early period, some students refrained from turning on their cameras and participating orally, expressing concerns about privacy and possible surveillance. This made it challenging for the faculty to gauge the mental health status of our students, and over time, the online-only interaction started to strain the sense of community within the program.

One of the first countermeasures we took was the introduction of Slack in the summer of 2020. This platform allowed us to set up various channels, ranging from those dedicated to courses, Covid updates, and re-entry issues to random venting, small group chats, and one-to-one communication. Slack significantly improved communication within JACS during a time when personal contact was limited. Even today, we continue to use Slack to enhance overall student-faculty communication, assist new students in settling quickly, and even foster connections with alumni. However, the introduction of Slack also posed challenges, as it blurs the boundaries between on and off times, further intensifying the role of faculty as student counselors (by and large, this dynamic evened out with our return to the classroom).

Another initiative we took involved organizing real-life activities outside the classroom, including group walks along Nagoya's 10,000-step courses for JACS members. The outdoor setting minimized the risk of contagion, offering a great

opportunity for us to reconnect in person and boost everyone's well-being through physical exercise in the sunshine. Even in the post-pandemic present, these walks are events that students look forward to—they have evolved into a textbook example of “invented traditions,” contributing to the sense of community at JACS.

Looking Ahead: Navigating the Post-Pandemic Phase

With the final Covid restrictions lifted in May 2023, just about six months before the time of writing, students who enrolled in the program in October 2023 submitted their applications during a period when restrictions were still in effect. Nevertheless, this group represents the first cohort since the 2019 admissions to arrive in Japan following the regular schedule. The applications for the 2024 admission mark the first round genuinely post-pandemic admissions, and any lasting repercussions of the pandemic will only become evident from this point onward.

When considering the lasting effects the pandemic may have had on the operation of Nagoya University’s international programs, we can highlight several positive changes. There is now much greater flexibility in managing student-related affairs, such as online enrollment, attendance, scholarship applications, digital signatures, and more. The pandemic prompted a renewed appreciation of the advantages of in-class teaching and real human interaction, but it also made us value the option of remote teaching. Classes can now flexibly transition to an online format when needed. Under certain conditions, individual students can opt for hybrid participation from home, particularly if they are unwell or injured. The increased flexibility in class conduct is undeniably a positive development.

On a more interpersonal level, the pandemic experience helped us reappreciate the importance of good communication and trust between students and faculty. Navigating this phase together has indeed strengthened certain bonds. Yet, at the same time it is difficult to overlook the persistent sense of disposability and unwelcomeness lingering among the foreign faculty and students who experienced the the coronavirus pandemic in Japan.