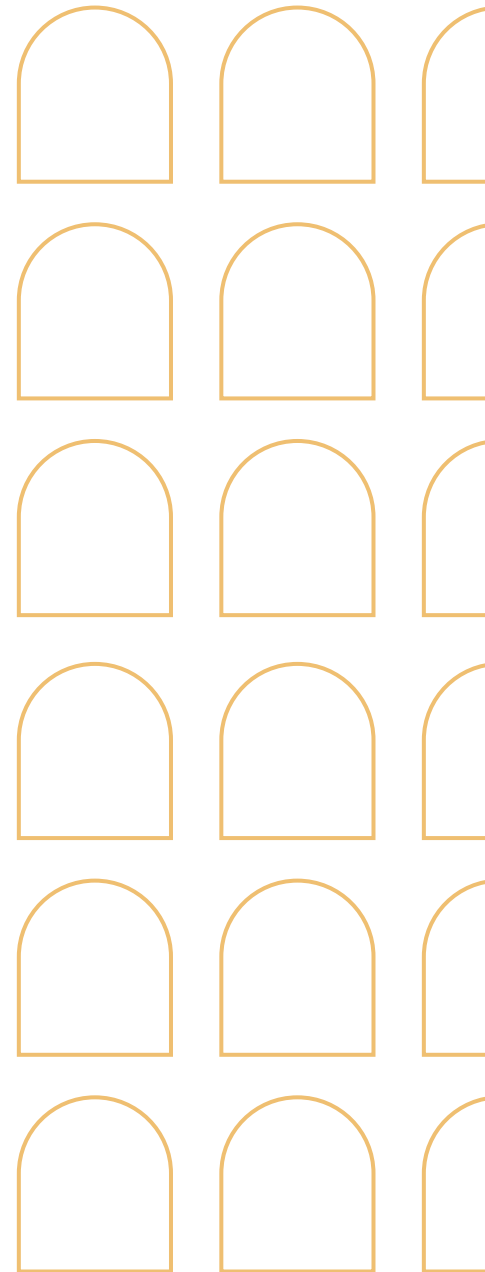


POLICY BRIEF

Displaced learners in Japan: student evacuees and policy liminality

Genocide, environmental crises and armed struggles in the last ten years have resulted in the highest ever recorded number of displaced people worldwide: over 100 million (UN News, 2022). Waves of displaced learners – a broad grouping including people with refugee, asylee and a variety of temporary protected statuses – have led to a suite of relevant services in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These initiatives include evaluation of credentials and prior learning, bridging and pathway programmes providing language training, mentorship programmes, legal clinics and so on (e.g. Hartley et al., 2018; Sontag, 2019).

This brief considers HEI support for displaced learners in Japan, a topic lacking comprehensive data. We analyse how international officers in Japanese HEIs describe the enrolment of displaced learners and support for them. This work draws on an expansive understanding of security as discussed by Rothschild (1995) among others, and moves beyond a construction of security as relevant to nation states to consider people's economic, social and political security.



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Refugee resettlement in Japan

While Japan is a major funder of the supranational architecture supporting refugees, refugee resettlement in Japan lags far behind most other countries: it was the fourth highest donor to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in 2022 (UNHCR Global Focus, 2022), yet in 2020 the country only recognised 47 refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Here we briefly discuss the extant policy framework and identify ways in which displaced people experience policy liminality (Unangst & de Wit, 2021). By policy liminality, we mean learners being “positioned between [policy] discourses rather than being centred within a cohesive suite of federal, state, and institutional-level policy initiatives” (Unangst et al., 2022, p. 44). Policy liminality may be perceived (reported) by learners and, as we argue here, it may also be identified by policy actors such as university administrators closely connected to the development and implementation of policy.

Dean and Nagashima (2007) argue that Japan “did not become a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol until 1981 ... [and it was] not until the mid-1970s, when Indo-Chinese refugees began to arrive on its shores, [that Japan had] to face the issue of refugees” (p. 482). In comparison with other OECD states, Flowers (2008) observes minimal civil society involvement in Japan, especially before 1989, and somewhat antagonistic relations with the Ministry of Justice. This circumstance has inhibited further development of policy at the nexus between migration and protection. Refugee status was granted to 330 cases among 3,544 applications for asylum between 1982 and 2004 and “although it became possible to grant a form of humanitarian status after 1991, this has happened in only 284 cases” (Dean and Nagashima, 2007, p. 482). Tarumoto (2019), among others, connects constrictive policy to an exclusionary ethnonationalist construction of Japanese identity. The public perception of immigration also remains largely negative (e.g. Green, 2017).

How does the process of obtaining protection in Japan seem from the perspective of an applicant? According to the Japan Association for Refugees (JAR) in 2017, key challenges include interpretation of ‘persecution’ being extremely narrow and typical-

ly limited to threats to a person’s life or personal freedom. All the relevant documents are only available in Japanese, neutral interpreters may not be available for interviews, and rejected applicants are not given an explanation of why they were rejected (JAR, 2017).

Recent efforts to increase the foreign population have taken place quietly and largely away from the public eye (Green, 2021). The admission of displaced learners could represent a similar attempt by the government to quietly admit refugees through a different means. Rather than directly changing the strict refugee admission criteria, admitting refugees as ‘displaced learners’ or ‘evacuees’ may achieve similar humanitarian aims but be more palatable to the public.

Displacement, internationalisation and Japanese HEIs

How can we understand the alignment of Japan’s internationalisation policy with its refugee policy? Internationalisation here refers to – as Knight (2003) defines it – “the process of integrating international, intercultural or global dimensions into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 2). There is a history of coordinated internationalisation practices in Japanese HEIs, with clear government directives promoting internationalisation since the 1980s (Burgess et al., 2010). Billions of yen have been invested in degree courses offered in English; the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme welcomes international teachers; and various excellence schemes including the 2014 Top Global University Project have been implemented. Furthermore, internationalisation policies “may be largely driven by the economic or political desire to compete globally, rather than by the desire to respond to changing economic and population realities such as Japan’s rapidly aging and diversifying society” (Nonaka & Phillips, 2017; p. 15).

Japanese HEIs are free to develop tailored admissions policies and procedures, although all universities require students to take and pass an entrance examination as a prerequisite for admission (Kuroda, 2020). Japanese HEIs comprise “777 universities divided into national (86), local public (91), and private (600) institutions” (Yonezawa, 2017; p. 376).

University sizes and focuses can vary considerably, with former ‘imperial’ universities representing the main public institutions typically hosting the largest numbers of international students. There is likewise a large range of private universities, with some HEIs, such as Waseda and Keio universities, being elite institutions which admit relatively larger numbers of international students.

Limited engagement with displaced learners is evident among Japanese HEIs. Some of this engagement takes place in initiatives spearheaded by various non-profit groups. For example, the Syrian Scholars Initiative was a scholarship programme developed by a foundation associated with the International Christian University in collaboration with the JAR to support Syrian students escaping conflict. This effort admitted only six students to Japan in 2016, and according to a 2017 JAR report, the second iteration of the programme garnered 1091 applicants with the aim of admitting eight (JAR, 2017). Similarly, the Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees, operated by the Japanese International Cooperative Agency in collaboration with the UNHCR, aimed to admit up to 150 master’s level Syrian students over five years.

Recently, the Japanese government began admitting Ukrainian nationals in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As of March 2023, Japan had admitted a total of 2,211 Ukrainian nationals since the onset of the conflict (MOJ, 2023). Data on the exact numbers of displaced students among the Ukrainian evacuees are not readily available, but listings published by the Japan Student Services Organization show 52 Japanese universities hosting approximately 200 displaced Ukrainian students, and another 66 Japanese language schools hosting approximately 250 Ukrainians as of March 2023 (JASSO, 2023).

Methodology

We conducted in-depth interviews with individuals charged with assisting international students in public and private HEIs. Eight interviews were conducted in total. These spanned four private universities, three public universities and the Pathways Japan NGO. The interview subjects and their affiliations are kept confidential in order to allow admin-

istrators to freely express their opinions. Pathways Japan had no objections to being named directly. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person and online between December 2022 and January 2023. They were conducted in either English or Japanese at the discretion of the interview subject. To organise and analyse the interviews, transcripts of them were subjected to thematic analysis (Saldaña 2013, p. 175).

Results

Displaced learner support

When discussing university support, we narrow our terminology and refer specifically to ‘student evacuees’ as this is the term used by the HEI-based interview participants. Student evacuees are students admitted to Japanese HEIs who could make a credible case to be considered asylum seekers or refugees.

There are clear differences between public and private universities regarding support for student evacuees. All the private universities represented in our study are members of the Japan Educational Pathways Network, a group of 18 universities operating in tandem with the Pathways Japan NGO, whereas the public universities sampled acted independently of any organisation. That is, the public universities showed very little pooling of information or resources.

Our interviews reflect the fact that university admission processes highly prioritise some connection with Japan, and in particular familiarity with the Japanese language. If applicants’ Japanese proficiency is low a high level of English is required, and all the universities expected that their student evacuees would work hard to improve their Japanese during the initial period of admission. University administrators uniformly reported positive feelings about hosting student evacuees, such as “I am happy to be able to provide these opportunities to them. They are all very good students” (Public-4) and “I’ve told them I’ve worked with thousands of students, but I think this has been the most meaningful and impactful project that I’ve worked on in my career. I’m happy that I’ve been able to help them” (Private-1).

Admissions

All the universities sampled initially admitted Ukrainian evacuees as non-matriculated students for up to one year. One difference between the public and private universities was the possibility of extending the students' stay. One public university, for example, only admitted Ukrainian evacuees coming from universities with which they had an exchange agreement. Much like a typical study abroad programme, the Ukrainian students could receive credits for their courses in Japan and were expected to leave Japan after their one-year stay. Private universities, in contrast, demonstrated more willingness to extend stays. After an initial six month to one year period, student evacuees seeking to continue their study could on passing an entrance exam be admitted as matriculated degree candidates and continue to receive identical financial benefits for the duration of their studies.

Visa status

All the student evacuees were admitted to Japan on short-term visas without recognition of refugee status. The students are referred to as 'evacuees' (*hinanmin*), rather than 'refugees' (*nanmin*) (Takahara, 2022). This is an important distinction, as 'refugee' implies long-term potentially permanent residence in Japan while 'evacuee' denotes a short-term stay. The benefits also differ. While recognised refugees are entitled to permanent residence in Japan, can bring their immediate families with them, participate in government-sponsored language and cultural instruction and obtain vocational support (Akashi, 2021), student evacuees are entitled to none of these benefits.

According to the study participants, after entering Japan almost all the evacuees changed their status to a 'designated activities' visa, rather than a student visa. 'Designated activities' is used in several different contexts, including as a work visa for highly skilled professionals, a stopgap measure for university graduates engaged in paid internships and for individuals on a working holiday in Japan (MOFA, 2015). A designated activities visa is usually issued for a period of six to twelve months with the possibility of renewal.

According to the interview participants, designated activities status has both advantages and disadvantages, including offering greater flexibility regarding part-time study. The main disadvantage is the short period of validity and the attendant uncertainty. Discussion of the designated activities visa also revealed that it has been applied differently to Syrian and Afghan evacuees. The participants noted that Ukrainians were encouraged by the immigration agency to maintain their designated activities visa, while Syrians and Afghans were discouraged from using it. Syrians and Afghans are asked to keep either a student or work visa, and are only permitted to obtain a designated activities visa as a stopgap measure, for example if they graduate from a Japanese university and are trying to find a job. If Syrians and Afghans apply for a designated activities visa, the processing time is reportedly around six months, with a heavy burden of proof. Ukrainians, on the other hand, are reportedly able to obtain a designated activities visa in a matter of hours with little apparent difficulty.

One administrator (Private-1) believes that the differential treatment of Ukrainians is a conscious government decision. Being victims of international aggression, Ukrainians are given preferential treatment. Another administrator was more direct (Private-2) and attributed favourable treatment of Ukrainians to racial preferences on the part of the Japanese public. In this view the Japanese government has a distinct racial bias, probably because of ingrained racist tendencies in Japanese society. As the international literature reflects the racist migration and education policies to which displaced learners are subjected (e.g. Villegas & Aberman, 2019), Japan seems to be implicated alongside other economically developed countries, and this issue must be investigated further.

Public and private funding

According to our respondents, there is not much variation in funding packages for student evacuees between public and private universities. All the universities sampled provide Ukrainian evacuees with free tuition and housing, and a monthly stipend of 60,000 to 80,000 yen a month. Travel expenses to Japan are usually covered as well. All the universities bear some amount of the burden of housing

and educating student evacuees, although there are some differences in how funds are obtained. One of the private universities we studied exclusively utilised its own internal budget (Private-3), one underwrote evacuees' costs with its own budget and donations from its alumni association (Private-2) and another had a more layered approach, securing additional funding from the local government, from a corporate sponsorship and through the Nippon Foundation (Private-1), a philanthropic organisation that has been donating funds to universities hosting Ukrainian evacuees (Kageyama, 2023).

In contrast, public university staff members indicated a much higher level of instability in funding and their universities were more likely to utilise donations to underwrite the cost of hosting student evacuees. Three of the public universities created specific 'Ukrainian disaster relief funds' to solicit donations aimed only at supporting Ukrainian evacuees, but all relevant staff members observed that long-term financial support for evacuees is an ongoing challenge. One public university official explicitly stated that despite the donations funding packages for evacuees could only be guaranteed for one year (Public-4). Moreover, only one of the HEIs received additional support from the local government and none received financial support from other organisations.

Discussion and conclusion

Although our participants have a positive attitude to student evacuees, there are usually no more than three evacuees at any given institution. This is an extremely low number in a comparative transnational context. While the number of evacuees has gradually grown and appears likely to continue expanding, limited financial resources, a lack of staff training and minimal government support could impede the stability of HEI interventions in the coming months and years. Greater collaboration with local and national governments, civil society and among HEIs themselves could potentially help universities overcome their resource constraints. One challenge for government and university administrators is to extend the momentum and positive sentiment regarding Ukrainian evacuees to other nationalities and admit comparable numbers of displaced learners, contesting exclusionary policies. This would

offer an opportunity for HEIs to (re)consider their *raison d'être*.

Japan has one of the lowest rates of refugee admissions in the world, typically approving less than 1% of asylum applications a year, yet a side door for students displaced from conflict areas appears to be slowly opening in Japan. Future research should query government priorities regarding displaced learners and examine more expansively how HEIs address displacement. There are also policy considerations. The Japanese government and public must contend with the question of what exactly humanitarian protection entails. Should displaced learners in Japan be considered refugees? Should they be admitted on a short-term basis under the responsibility of universities, which is not the predominant model in economically developed settings? Are displaced learners coming to Japan refugees by another name, or do they represent a new category of temporary precarious humanitarian protection?

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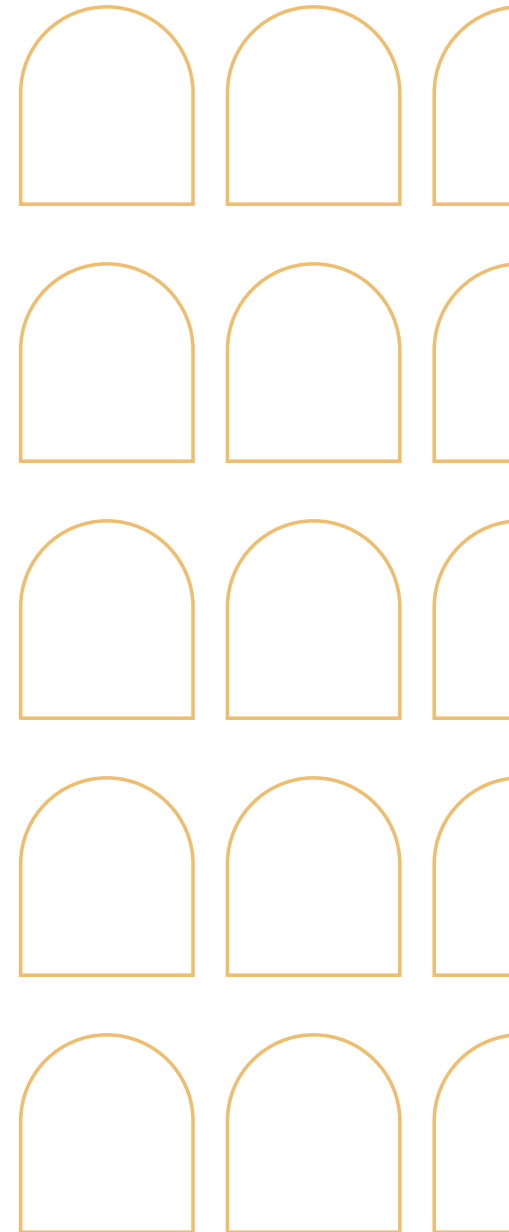
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