

## 【Research notes】

# Multicultural Workplaces in Japan and the Third Mission of Universities:

## Host Society Attitudes Toward Foreign Workers and Implications for Higher Education in Japan

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Japan is in a process of social change that will have far-reaching implications for higher education institutions. The challenges of a shrinking, aging population have long been topics in educational reform, as universities compete for a smaller number of school-age enrolments and work to develop programs to cater for recurrent and professional education needs. However, apart from the shrinking population, the composition of Japanese society is also in a process of flux. To deal with the increasingly severe labor shortages faced by small-to-medium sized businesses, the Japanese government has taken unprecedented steps to officially open the country to foreign unskilled labor. As the native population decreases, the foreign population is set to increase, bringing visible and significant changes to workplaces and residential communities. The current research examines the way that Japanese host society members are receiving the newest groups of foreign workers. The discussion in this paper focuses on the implications of Japan's growing multiculturalism for higher education and proposes that more regional studies are needed to illuminate the challenges being faced by communities that are rapidly becoming culturally diverse. The paper concludes with suggestions of areas where higher education institutions (HEIs) may play a role in facilitating the social integration of migrants and promoting local community understanding of migrants' needs, as part of universities' 'third mission' (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020: 18) to contribute to society beyond academia.

### 1. Background

#### 1.1 Population composition changes in Japan

The social integration of migrants has become an urgent issue for local and national governments throughout the world. Japan is no exception to this trend. Population aging and decline is leading to increasingly serious labor shortages and a growing dependence on foreign workers: the total population is projected to drop from 127 million in 2015 to 88 million by 2065 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2017). The government forecasts that an average of over 300,000 foreign workers are needed every year to support Japan's economy (Ministry of Land Infrastructure Transport and Tourism, 2019). By the end of 2020, foreign residents in Japan exceeded 2.8 million people. The number of foreign workers is now at a record high, reaching 1.72 million people as of October 2020. Of this number, technical intern trainees (*gino jisshusei*) and specified skill workers (*tokutei*

*gino gaikokujin*), employed at mainly blue-collar work sites, are increasing most rapidly (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2021). In November 2021, the Japanese government announced that it is considering allowing all holders of the Specified Skill Worker visa to apply for permanent residency (Kyodo News, 2021). This may lead to more foreign unskilled workers settling permanently in urban and rural communities in Japan.

#### 1.2 Higher education internationalization trends

There has long been significant pressure from the government and the public on Japanese universities to 'internationalize' to be successful on the global stage (Stigger et al, 2018). In practice, the term 'internationalization' has been closely linked with English language education in Japan. Competitive funding projects aimed at attracting international students and study abroad programs for Japanese students have typically been at the forefront of a

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university's internationalization strategy. While such programs have given the top universities a 'veneer of internationality', they have been criticized for not delivering any improvement in the quality or content of university curricula (Ota, 2018: 94).

As the Japanese population shrinks and minority groups become more prominent, there is a need to turn the focus of internationalization inwards, to serve the needs of a diversifying domestic population. Yet it seems that education policy is not yet reflecting such changing needs. The Japanese Cabinet Secretariat's Council for the Creation of Future Education made its first recommendation on the future roles for universities in May 2022. The recommendation's list of social issues to be addressed made no mention of increases in culturally diverse communities, nor the challenge of how to address the educational needs of Japan's growing foreign population (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022). Universities are positioned predominantly as educational bodies catering to the needs of the advanced knowledge society, in effect excluding those who may benefit from intercultural education greatly: those without access to HEI educational programs.

The imperative of serving society has not been a driving feature of higher education internationalization efforts to date, in Japan or elsewhere. Jones et al (2021) decry the competitive tendencies of HEI internationalization strategies and call for greater attention to the 'third mission' of higher education, to contribute to and engage with society (Jones et al, 2021: 332). They link this imperative with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and suggest initiatives for academics, students, and university support staff to engage more closely with local communities and share the benefits of international activities among a broader base, not limited to university stakeholders.

Greater attention to the migrant population is one way for HEIs to fulfill their role of serving society. Scholars in Europe have positioned this avenue as the third mission's function of 'co-creation for sustainability', where

universities work together with local government and civil society to address social issues (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020: 18). This avenue is also coming to the attention of a growing number of scholars in Japan, who are making recommendations for the use of education as a tool to redress growing conflict between majority and minority groups (for example Nukaga et al, 2019; Matsuo, 2017). The current research is positioned as a study of social groups that could potentially benefit from such educational initiatives.

### **1.3 Intercultural contact between Japanese citizens and foreign residents**

Research suggests that there is still little meaningful contact between Japanese citizens and foreign residents. In contrast with long-standing immigration nations such as the United States, Canada, or Australia, Japan has a relatively low ratio of foreign residents, currently at just over 2% of the population (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2021). Within Asia also, it has been found that Japanese people have had significantly less contact with foreign residents or workers than contact levels in Malaysia, Thailand, or Singapore. This lack of contact has been raised as a factor in negative attitudes toward migrants in Japan, including seeing migrants as a drain on the economy, a threat to Japan's culture and heritage, and a reason for increased crime (ILO, 2019).

The fact that there has been little meaningful intercultural contact to date may be a reason for the relatively small amount of research on intercultural relations between Japanese and foreign workers or residents. Compared with extensive research overseas investigating the nature of relations between people of differing cultural backgrounds (for example Pettigrew et al, 2011; Vezzali & Stathi, 2017) and how to improve such relations (for example Paluck & Green, 2009), there is still limited research in Japan on these topics. Moreover, the research that has been conducted to date on public attitudes toward migrants in Japan, including important recent work by Korekawa (2019); Kage et al (2021);

Nagayoshi (2021), has generally utilized large-scale surveys and quantitative methods. While such studies provide invaluable insights into general trends in opinions and attitudes, there is a lack of qualitative research in this field to investigate the feelings and thought processes behind the responses given in such surveys. The current research aims to address this gap in knowledge.

## 2. Research aims

Against the backdrop of changing social circumstances in Japan, the current research examines how the most recent foreign workers (technical intern trainees) are being received by the host society. The research questions are:

RQ1: What kind of attitudes do Japanese workers have toward their foreign technical intern trainee co-workers?

RQ2: What kind of relationships are developing between Japanese workers and their foreign technical intern trainee co-workers?

The overarching purpose of the research is to illuminate the nature of intercultural relations developing in multicultural worksites. It is hoped that this study may contribute to debate on the social integration of Japan's most recent foreign workers and potential roles for HEIs.

## 3. Method and research sites

This research uses a case study methodology, adopting qualitative research methods. The study participants were Japanese workers employed at blue-collar worksites alongside technical intern trainees and specified skill workers. A coastal region of Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture was selected due to previously established connections and the relatively high proportion of foreign trainees in the area: 87 of the 2,149 residents (4%) in the region studied are non-Japanese (Ishinomaki City, 2021). Data was collected at four seafood processing companies during three field trips conducted in June 2021, August 2021, and July 2022. A total of thirteen Japanese workers participated. Participant profiles are provided in Table 1.

The companies surveyed are referred to here as

Company A (employing 15 Indonesian trainees), Company B (7 Vietnamese trainees), Company C (17 trainees from China and Myanmar), and Company D (11 Indonesian trainees). The codes assigned to the participants in Table 1 and throughout this paper indicate the company they are respectively employed at, by using the letter corresponding to each company (A, B, C, or D) in front of the participant code number. Ages are indicated due to relevance with research findings. Gender is not reported to protect anonymity and due to lack of relevance with findings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant individually. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were conducted in Japanese by the author and recorded with the written consent of the participants in line with the ethics procedures of the author's university of employment. Recordings were transcribed and translated into English by the author. Translation accuracy was confirmed by a professional Japanese native translator and understanding of dialect was checked by a native Japanese person from the area surveyed.

Data obtained from the interviews was first analyzed in an inductive manner in order to identify themes connected to the two research questions. Interview content was transcribed verbatim and coded using MAXQDA computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. In keeping with the interpretative, inductive nature of the project, codes were identified through repeated readings of the transcripts during the coding process, based on loosely defined categories set to ensure responsiveness to the research questions.

Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence was used as a theoretical framework for the second stage of analysis, the aim of which was to identify the attitudes of the research participants from an intercultural competence perspective. Three codes were established for this stage of the analysis: one each for 'Respect', 'Openness and withholding judgment', and 'Curiosity and discovery' that comprise the 'Requisite Attitudes' layer of Deardorff's model (Deardorff, 2006). In

**Table 1. Research participant profiles**

Participant	Age	Years of employment at current company	Previous experience working with foreign workers	Work duties
A1	52	38	No	Owner/manager
A2	56	10	No	Dining hall, dormitory management, Living Guidance Instructor
A3	41	13	No	Fishing, seafood processing, Living Guidance Instructor
A4	50	15	No	Fishing, seafood processing
A5	59	16	No	Fishing, seafood processing, Living Guidance Instructor
B1	49	30	No	Owner/manager
B2	45	26	No	Owner/manager
B3	50	4	No	Office administration
B4	45	3	No	Fishing, seafood processing
B5	38	5	No	Fishing, seafood processing, Living Guidance Instructor
B6	45	6	No	Fishing and seafood processing, Living Guidance Instructor
C1	50s	2	Yes	Seafood processing work
D1	43	10	Yes	Fishing, seafood processing, document support, Living Guidance Instructor

contrast with the inductive process used in the first stage of analysis, in this stage the data was examined in a deductive manner to find instances of the elements in Deardorff's model and help to understand how the attitudes of the participants may be conceptualized in terms of intercultural competence. This process was used primarily to answer research question 1.

## 4. Findings

This research looked at two aspects of intercultural relations developing between Japanese workers and their foreign technical trainee co-workers: (1) the attitudes of the Japanese workers toward the foreign trainees, and (2) the relationships developing between the two groups. Findings are organized here to address these two aspects.

### 4.1 Attitudes toward technical trainees

One of the aims of this study is to illuminate the attitudes of the research participants toward their technical intern trainee co-workers. The findings reported here concentrate on the 'attitudes' layer of Deardorff's model: specifically, 'Respect', 'Openness and withholding judgment', and 'Curiosity and discovery' (Deardorff, 2006). These terms were used as codes in the analysis of the data.

#### 4.1.1 Respect: valuing other cultures

For the majority of research participants, there were very few instances of 'valuing other cultures' identified in data analysis. There were significant individual differences in the level of interest shown by the participants in foreign cultures in general, and the cultures of the technical trainees in particular. For instance, the two comments below provide an illustrative contrast. Both of the following participants were involved in the selection of technical trainees to be employed by their respective companies, which entailed traveling to Indonesia to interview prospective trainees.

I wanted to know what kind of place they come from, so [when I was in Indonesia] I asked if there was a mosque nearby that I could visit, even though I'm not Muslim. And someone took me to a mosque. I just really wanted to experience the local culture. (D1)

(When asked if he had learned anything about the trainees' country)

No. I went to Indonesia to select them. So, I don't really have anything else that I want to know about Indonesia. (A1)

Participant D1 above was an outlier for this and the other attitudes examined. He expressed a strong interest in foreign countries and cultures that was not evident among other participants. Knowledge about the trainees'

language and culture seemed to be limited amongst most participants, as indicated by the quotes below.

I guess I've learned some Indonesian words. I can't really say anything though [...] (B3)

Vietnamese is difficult. I can't say anything [...] They say some words to me sometimes, like "This is how you say this". But I can't remember it. (B5)

Some of the participants seemed to have learned a few words of the trainees' language, and their religious practices, but for the most part cultural exchange seemed to flow in one direction, with the trainees learning and absorbing the Japanese language and culture. Awareness of foreign cultures was fairly superficial, centering on appearance, food, and religion, as indicated in the following comments.

They [the Vietnamese trainees] try not to get tanned [...] They're whiter than Japanese people [...] Apparently over there [in Vietnam] it looks better to have fair skin. (B4)

For dinner, they [the Indonesian trainees] like to eat fried food. They put it all on one plate and eat it with their hands. (A2)

Notwithstanding the lack of awareness of less visible aspects of the trainees' cultural background, the participants were respectful of the more overt elements of the trainees' cultures, such as food and religion. This was particularly evident among participants working with trainees from Indonesia. These participants were understanding of the Indonesian trainees' dietary and religious practices, including those that impacted their work. They were mindful of the trainees' custom of praying five times a day, fasting during the Ramadan period, and requiring a room to pray in the workplace.

It seems like there are different opinions about Ramadan [...] Some of them don't even drink water even if they're working. Apparently from sunrise to sunset, they can't drink one drop of water. (D1)

A few participants had also acquired an understanding

of less overt elements of the trainees' culture. The participant below, for example, was knowledgeable about and showed interest in Vietnamese thinking regarding marriage.

Apparently in Vietnam it's customary for men to get married by age 25 or 26...So the trainees who first came here are now at the age where they should be married, and they say [if they don't get married] they'll be past their use-by date. It's stricter for men there than for women. (B3)

Participant B3's knowledge of the trainees' home country marriage customs was a rare example of cultural knowledge that went beyond food, appearance, and religion.

#### 4.1.2 Openness and withholding judgment

There were slightly more instances of the 'Withholding judgment' attitude found in the interview data than 'Valuing other cultures.' For this trait also, there were considerable individual differences evident. It was clear from the interviews that participants were making efforts to understand and accept the cultural differences that they perceived when working and interacting with the trainees. Many of the participants appeared to accept the Indonesian trainees' religious and dietary practices, even though they were not religious themselves.

I don't really know anything about Islam, or religion. But I can tell it's important to [the trainees], so I would never tell them that they can't do it. (D1)

Although trainee customs were discussed with respect and in most cases, a non-judgmental tone, some participants phrased their comments on the trainees' cultural and lifestyle differences in a way that suggested that they may have certain opinions or judgments about the trainees and their cultural practices. The participant quoted below, for example, frequently emphasized that although *he* accepted the cultural differences, he imagined that it might be more difficult for other people to accept without judgment.

They do things like cooking pigs, right? You know,

it's on tv sometimes. I think that's fine. If it's in a rural area. Personally, I'm ok with it. It's just like a barbecue. But if they did something like that in the city... (B4)

This participant seemed to want to appear open and non-judgmental toward the trainees, but the fact that he raised certain behaviors of the trainees as open to criticism by others seemed to indicate that he may hold the same views.

Another example is provided by the participant below. Her true feelings on the eating habits of the trainees were unclear: she spoke about how she had become used to their customs, but there was some ambiguity in her tone.

They eat with their hands. I guess that's more comfortable for them. They like that better than sitting here with everyone eating with chopsticks. They don't have a table, so they just sit anywhere. Eating with their hands [laughs]. (A2)

In this part of the discussion, it was difficult to tell whether this participant was judging the trainees for this eating style, and to what extent she was accepting of this custom. She was clearly surprised by the different eating style of the Indonesian trainees, and as the person in charge of the company dining hall, this was a difference that had relevance to her work.

Other participants spoke more openly about their disapproval of some of the trainees' cultural and lifestyle practices.

As soon as they finish work, they play music really loudly. It's fine here, but there must be some people who don't like it [...] Personally I think it's ok. But I wouldn't like it if they did it near my house. (B2)

They really specialize in cooking oily food. So they use oil every day, filling up the frypan with oil, and they fry chicken and the oil goes everywhere. (B3)

Apparently in Vietnam they eat dogs and cats. When they first arrived, I told them that they can't eat pets here [laughs]. That's the custom here. We

don't eat our pets. (B5)

In this way, these three participants were critical of the trainees' overt expression of their culture in their free time outside of the workplace.

Discussions on the way the trainees look after their living environment in the company dormitories also tended to be openly critical. Grievances were expressed over daily living habits, including garbage disposal and the cleanliness of shared areas in the dormitories.

Keeping their room clean, that's the only problem. [...] No matter how many times we tell them. [...] It's not that they don't do it at all. They say 'Ok, ok'. But the office people have to keep telling them off about it. (B1)

I tell them - you might be okay with this, but you need to think about keeping it clean for the trainees coming after you. I say this, but I end up cleaning up after them anyway. (D1)

The Japanese participants had different views on the reasons that the trainees did not maintain clean and tidy living areas. Some assumed that it was due to cultural differences, others thought that the fact that the trainees were male was the reason. Some expressed their frustration in a forgiving tone; others were more openly exasperated. In any case this was a common issue that was raised in almost all interviews.

#### 4.1.3 Tolerating ambiguity

Compared with the other two attitudes of 'valuing other cultures' and 'withholding judgment', the third attitude of 'tolerating ambiguity' is interpreted here as a more general ability to accept difference; in this case, difference as represented by the presence of the foreign trainees. As noted above, Japan has a significantly low ratio of foreign residents compared to other countries and regions; for this reason, the ability to tolerate situations where outcomes are not as predictable as they would be if only Japanese people are involved is seen to be an important factor in the pursuit of smooth



intercultural interactions. While almost all Japanese participants had not interacted with foreign residents prior to meeting the trainees, they had all been working with the trainees for a number of years. It is assumed that a certain tolerance for ambiguity had been developed over that time.

During the interviews, the participants spoke about how they gradually became used to the trainees; in other words, how they had become accustomed to the difference and ambiguity caused by their presence in various ways. For example, the participant below spoke about overcoming linguistic challenges in the workplace.

It was hard when they first came, but after about six months you get to know them, like, their personalities [...] And the trainees who are senior know the work, so I can say something in Japanese to them and they interpret what I said to the new guys. (A4)

Other participants also talked about ways they handled the ambiguities inherent in the multilingual workplace.

When they first come, we communicate using gestures. Then we just show them how to do the work. (B6)

I think the foreigners are watching the expression on the Japanese people's faces. Because they can't understand what we're saying [...] So I try to always have a smile on my face. (B5)

They couldn't understand at first, so I would do things like write it in *katakana* [phonetic alphabet], or use gestures, or actually show them what I was trying to say. I'd bring it to them and say "This is dirty" [...] Now they know the Japanese word for 'dirty' very well [laughing]. (B3)

Participant C1, quoted below, spoke of the adjustments she needed to make to communicate with the trainees, compared with communication with other Japanese co-workers. She spoke at length about the difficulties of interacting with the foreign trainees in her workplace.

There are communication issues. For example, something that Japanese people would understand straight away, it's different when you're trying to communicate quickly [with the trainees] ...If it was a Japanese person, you could say "You should do it like this, not like that" and they would say "Ok, like this, right?" [...] But because we don't speak the same language, when you say to them [the trainees] "You do it like this" they think they're being told off. (C1)

This participant had given the communication issues some thought. She was also keenly aware of the ease with which Japanese people are able to communicate with each other using vague expressions, based on what is assumed to be common understanding. This kind of linguistic self-awareness was also shown by the participant below, in comments about language difficulties when the trainees first arrived.

Where we struggled was...the Indonesians come to Japan. And they study Japanese before they come. But they study *standard* Japanese. Everyone here speaks in a strong dialect, right? So, we *think* we're speaking in standard Japanese, but they have no idea what we're talking about [laughing]. (A1)

In this way, the ambiguity of the multilingual workplace was a common theme in the interviews. The Japanese workers had devised creative ways to overcome the linguistic barrier, and all explained that there were no major language issues in the workplace at the current time.

Separately from the language issues, some of the participants explained their own mindset change in accommodating the presence of foreign trainees in the workplace.

It was my first time working with foreigners, so I was very aware of the fact that they are not Japanese and that they'll have different ways of doing things. (B3)

I had some feeling in the back of my mind, not exactly discriminating against [the trainees], but I was thinking 'Should I be working with these

people? From China? Myanmar?’ I wasn’t necessarily thinking that they were going to steal things or stab people or do bad things like that, but I was thinking ‘Is it ok for me to be working with them?’ So, I had some kind of fear at the start, but [...] now I’m ok. (C1)

Other participants made comments that indicated that while they recognize the ambiguity and difference brought by the trainees, they do not necessarily accept it. For example, the participants quoted below indicated that they felt the need to teach the trainees the ‘right’ way to do things to fit in to life in Japan, to ‘fix’ their daily living habits.

Their customs are different from Japanese people. So as expected, at first [there were issues with] cleaning, and walking inside with shoes on. That happened at first, but now they do things right. (B5)

From their perspective, I think getting used to the way we live in Japan was probably the hardest. Daily living customs are the most important thing for people so understandably, even when we tell them “This is the way we do things here”, they just couldn’t get it right for a long time. (B3)

This differentiation between the *recognition* of ambiguity on one hand and the *acceptance* of ambiguity and difference on the other was also observed among other participants. In this way, discussions on daily living practices highlighted a clear difference in the level of tolerance for workplace behaviors, and the level of tolerance for behaviors outside of work.

There were also indications that while some participants were comfortable with the ambiguity coming from the trainees who they know and work with, they are less comfortable with foreign residents or workers who are not trainees. Participant A3 mentioned:

I only know Indonesians, so I don’t know what other [foreigners] are like [...] That’s different. I guess they act the same way but [...] I haven’t seen them so I don’t know. (A3)

The following comment by B4 was also revealing:

White foreigners are like ‘rare *pokemons*’ from Japanese people’s perspective [...] Maybe we’re intimidated by them. We stare at them. [...] But if I see people from Vietnam when I go shopping, it’s completely fine. (B4)

This participant said that he came across many Asian residents during shopping trips and felt comfortable in their presence. He contrasted this with the uncomfortable feelings he experienced when encountering small numbers of Western foreigners at the shopping center. The contrast presented by B4 between his comfort with Asian residents and discomfort with Western residents seems to indicate that his contact and relationships with foreign residents are limited and that ‘difference’ is predominantly interpreted at the superficial level of appearance.

In summary, analysis of the attitudes of the Japanese participants toward the technical intern trainees showed that while there are individual differences in terms of level of awareness of the trainees’ language and culture, there are a number of common trends. Respect and tolerance for the trainees’ religious customs was uniformly present among participants. The participants also showed wide acceptance for ambiguity in the workplace, as represented by communication challenges, and a willingness to take creative measures to overcome such challenges. On the other hand, tolerance for ambiguity as represented by the presence and behavior of the trainees in their private lives in the local community was an area where opinions were less positive and an assimilationist tendency in thinking was observed.

## 4.2 Relationships

This study also aimed to understand what kind of relationships are being formed between the Japanese participants and their technical trainee co-workers, both at work and outside the workplace. Information on relationships was gathered through discussions with the Japanese participants and the trainees during their



respective semi-structured interviews, and through observations made during the three fieldwork trips.

#### 4.2.1 Workplace relationships

The workplace relationships between the Japanese and foreign workers within the workplaces surveyed here may be summarized as positive, friendly, and supportive. The Japanese workers interviewed provided uniformly high praise for the trainees as hard-working and intelligent workers who are indispensable for the running of the business. Observations on the cross-cultural relationships forming at the survey sites were informative, showing in many cases a friendly camaraderie between the Japanese and foreign workers, and a lively and casual atmosphere at the respective worksites. The semi-structured interviews with both the Japanese participants and the technical trainees indicated that there is a strong sense of ‘family’ in the relationships with the trainees. Terms such as the Japanese ‘*ko*’ (meaning child) and ‘*kawaii*’ were commonly used by the Japanese participants when referring to the trainees, indicating a sense of affection. Comments by the participants reinforced this image.

When you’re with them all the time, you become attached to them. They really become like your own kids [...] (A1)

It’s because they’re at the age where they could be my own sons. And on top of that they’re living far from their own parents. (B3)

The participants expressed sympathy and understanding for the trainees’ circumstances.

They’re putting up with a lot, working every day here, and then sending money back home [...] we see them working really hard to fulfill their dreams. (D1)

If they were back home, they wouldn’t be experiencing any of the daily life issues they have here. The dormitory that they live in...they share the toilet and the bath, and they have to take turns

cooking [...] They’ve come here to make a living, so I feel sorry for them. (C1)

The parental stance taken by the Japanese participants may be understandable given the typically young age of the trainees (early 20s). The participants evidently also felt a sense of protectiveness toward the trainees in the face of initially negative attitudes from the local community.

Around two years ago, someone came and told us that they (the trainees) had been trampling on their garden. So I said to them, if that happens again, please take a photo of the shoe print. Then I’ll check to see if it matches with our trainees’ shoes. They never contacted me again. (B3)

There’s really only a small number of trainees who actually do anything wrong. Other than that, I feel like there are a lot of cases where the Japanese side are misunderstanding the situation. (D1)

In this way, there was evidence of the Japanese participants acting as the protectors of the trainees against negative attitudes or discriminatory actions. At the same time, the parent-child aspect of the relationships with the trainees included concern expressed by the Japanese participants at how the trainees behave outside of work. This was particularly pronounced among the participants who are involved in overseeing the dormitories where the trainees live. This parental stance also included negative opinions on the way the trainees look after their living quarters. The complaints aired by many of the participants on the lack of cleanliness of the trainee dormitories were reported in 4.1.2 above.

#### 4.2.2 Relationships outside of the workplace

Relationships with the trainees outside of the workplace had clearly been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of the interviews, large-scale work events had been stopped. Participants spoke about two main types of interaction with the trainees outside of work during the pandemic: small-scale dinners and

shopping trips. While most participants said that they had little interaction with the trainees outside of work, some participants spoke about taking the trainees out.

We go out once or twice a month. I have to take them shopping anyway. So we go quite a lot. (B5)

Before (the pandemic) I used to go out in Ishinomaki with one of the trainees [...] There were a couple of them that I used to go out with [...] But it wasn't that often. (A4)

On days off I take about five of them out to dinner. [...] We usually go to *yakiniku* [beef restaurant] [...] Actually I'd rather take them to a ramen shop but they always say "we want to eat meat", so what can I do? And it's always me that pays [laughing]. (A3)

There were one or two Japanese workers at each company who said that they associate with the trainees outside of work. These were the same participants who have the role of 'Living Guidance Instructor' (*seikatsu shidojin*; see Table 1), whose duties include taking the trainees shopping, to the doctor when required, or driving them to Ishinomaki City to meet other friends. It was difficult to tell whether these participants were spending time with the trainees for friendship, or as part of their job. The participants quoted above, for example, spoke about taking the trainees out for dinner after shopping trips or visits to the doctor.

In addition to the pandemic, there seemed to be other factors preventing the development of relationships with the trainees outside of work. The participant below, for instance, expressed concern about the trainees' group dynamics.

Say I want to go shopping, and say I invite one of the trainees because she's easy to talk to, if I ask just one of them to go with me, in the end all the other trainees might end up bullying that one trainee that I invited. So, sometimes I really want to ask them out or ask one of them to come shopping with me, but I try not to. (C1)

This participant had previously spoken about friction with and among the trainees at work. For this reason, it seemed that she hesitated to build any relationships outside of work for fear of the impact it would have on the trainees themselves and the work atmosphere.

Another factor preventing the development of relationships was evidently the family situation of some of the Japanese participants. This was expressed by the participant quoted below. He spoke about the fact that he felt sorry for the trainees and would like to spend more time with them outside of work if he could.

I don't really see the trainees outside of work. If I bump into them in Ishinomaki maybe...[...] Sometimes I take them shopping in my car, but not very often. Or I might ask them to go fishing on our day off [...] They probably came to Japan expecting to make Japanese friends. So if all they do is work, you feel sorry for them right? (B4)

This participant mentioned that the fact that he has a family means that he cannot spend very much time with the trainees outside of working hours. This also seemed to be the case for all the owner/managers interviewed, who said that they did not socialize with the trainees outside of work except for large company-wide events. The age gap between the Japanese workers and the trainees was also mentioned frequently and may be seen as a potential inhibiting factor in the development of social relations.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Limited understanding of social integration

The findings in this study indicated that the Japanese participants have high expectations of the trainees in the area of daily life: how they live and conduct themselves outside of work. A number of the participants indicated that they would like the trainees to behave in the 'right' way while in Japan. They were uniformly respectful and caring towards the technical trainees, cognizant of their cultural practices and willing to accommodate their religious and cultural needs. At the same time, there

seemed to be an unquestioned belief that the trainees held responsibility for adjusting their behavior to do things the ‘right’ way while in Japan, especially in the way they lived outside of the company. It is important to note that the Japanese participants in this study seemed to see assimilation – or doing things in the same way as Japanese residents – as the best way for the trainees to do well and live problem-free during their time in Japan. In Japan, scholars have suggested that there is a strong assimilationist tendency (Morita, 2014), where the burden of adjustment is predominantly thought to be the responsibility of the migrant.

This calls into question the concept of social integration of migrants and how it is understood and practiced in the Japanese context. The participants here had little or no prior experience living in a different culture or interacting with foreign residents. This indicates that they may be unaware of the burden placed on migrants in general as they try to adapt to daily life and work in a foreign culture.

The findings in the current study also indicated that the host communities and companies that are receiving the trainees are as yet unprepared, culturally, emotionally, and practically, to accept trainees as ‘settled’ and permanent members of their community. Rather than rejecting the trainees, there seemed to have been little thought given to such an eventuality. The fact that there were more negative opinions expressed about the behavior of the trainees in the community, outside of work, indicates that expectations in this area are high, and that considerable mindset change may be required to accept non-Japanese cultural and daily living practices as a permanent part of community life.

## 5.2 Lack of social interaction to facilitate inclusion

Workplace relations between the Japanese workers and their trainee co-workers surveyed here were found to be friendly and positive. At the same time, the lack of social relations between the two groups outside of the workplace was a common finding from the interviews. It

seems that the pandemic, the family situation of the Japanese workers, and age differences are adversely impacting the development of relationships outside of work. The findings here corroborate the results of surveys in Miyagi Prefecture indicating that there is decreasing social contact between Japanese and foreign residents (Suematsu, 2022) and offer some much-needed qualitative data on possible reasons for this situation.

Beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a need to consider how to facilitate friendships between the foreign trainees and local community members. A number of the participants in this study commented that the trainees’ Japanese language skills would not further develop unless they spent more time with Japanese people outside of work. Some also expressed pity for the trainees who they thought had probably assumed they would make Japanese friends in Japan. There is a high awareness of this issue among local government bodies: for example, Miyagi International Association (MIA) is proactively addressing the issue through events and community activities, based on concerns that the trainees lack visibility in the community (Miyagi International Association, n.d.). However, such activities are often attended by Japanese volunteers who are typically much older than the trainees. There is a need for more opportunities for trainees to interact with Japanese people of their own age.

## 6. Implications for education

From the perspective of education, this study offers a rare preliminary examination of the intercultural attitudes of Japanese blue-collar workers, a section of the population that typically does not proceed to higher education. The research participants surveyed in this particular study displayed predominantly positive attitudes toward their foreign co-workers, and there was no evidence of issues that have been reported in the media related to the treatment of technical intern trainees (Matsumuro, 2022).

However, as noted above, it was clear that the social

integration of technical trainees and other migrants is viewed as a one-way process to be undertaken predominantly by the migrants. The data collected in this study indicated that it may be difficult for people who have lived their lives in a mono-cultural environment to imagine the social and cultural adjustment needs of foreign trainees who choose to settle in Japan in the future. In addition, there appears to be a lack of social interaction with the trainees outside of the workplace and in the community. Based on these findings, the following opportunities for HEIs are suggested.

### **6.1 Intercultural training for receiving companies**

The question of how to imagine and manage future diverse communities is a practical issue requiring experience and knowhow. Unlike nations that have been built based on open immigration policies such as the United States and Australia, there are few examples of truly multicultural communities in rural Japan. It may therefore be understandably difficult for Japanese citizens living in rural areas to envisage a future where mosques sit beside temples, foreign food restaurants are commonplace, and languages other than Japanese are heard in the street. Even more than such overt changes, differences in the way people from different cultures communicate, spend their free time, and define the concept of community may be even more challenging and require greater adjustment on the part of host community members. The Japanese participants in the current research demonstrated consideration for and understanding of superficial cultural differences such as the dietary customs and religious practices of the trainees. However, there was little evidence of more in-depth awareness or knowledge of the trainees' cultural background. This situation recalls Hall's (1976) Iceberg Model of Culture, where 10% of culture is said to be comprised of external elements such as appearance, traditions, and behaviors. The remaining 90% of one's culture is said to be hidden from immediate view, and comprises elements that are not explicitly learned, such

as value systems, beliefs, biases, thought patterns, and gender roles (Hall, 1976). As those working in blue-collar industries have often not had access to education for international understanding as offered by HEIs, nor enjoyed opportunities for study or travel abroad, awareness of deeper elements of foreign cultures is understandably lacking.

In this process of spreading awareness and understanding of cultural differences among those in contact with the foreign trainees, it will be crucial to foster understanding among receiving companies and communities of the practical, social, and emotional needs of foreign workers who chose to make Japan their home, such as the trainees in the current research. Without such knowledge and understanding, the 'harmonious co-existence' in the government's Multicultural Coexistence policy (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2022), where foreign residents are treated as community members rather than guests, will remain a vague and empty catchphrase.

The role for educators in this work cannot be underestimated. The growing size of foreign populations in rural areas, like the one surveyed here, has highlighted the need for education and training of the managers, co-workers, and administrative staff who are tasked with welcoming the foreign trainees and handling their day-to-day needs and concerns. Knowledge of trainees' respective cultures and understanding of communication practices and cultural tendencies at a deeper level – comprising 90% of culture in Hall's (1976) iceberg model – could facilitate the social integration of trainees who are attempting to adapt to life in Japan. This could also help to make Japan a more attractive destination for the foreign workers that Japanese industry currently needs. The large numbers of international students currently enrolled in Japanese universities who originate from the same countries as the trainees (for example Vietnam and China) have a crucial role to play as cultural and linguistic support intermediaries in such activities.

Additionally, given that owner/managers of companies

accepting trainees often set the lead for the treatment of the trainees by other workers, intensive, hands-on intercultural training courses for owner/managers could be one method to prevent the mistreatment and discriminatory acts by workers toward technical trainees reported in the media (Matsumuro, 2022).

## **6.2 Outreach programs for meaningful contact among the younger generation**

The current study has indicated that positive relations with the trainees may not necessarily develop in a positive or productive way without intervention. Workplace relations in this study were seen to conform to at least three of the conditions posited by Allport (1954) in his intergroup contact hypothesis: that if two groups are of equal status; are required to cooperate; share a common goal or objective; and enjoy support from authority or an overseeing body, positive relations may develop (Allport, 1954). From this perspective, the very structure and mechanisms of the companies studied here functioned as intervening forces, resulting in generally friendly and positive intergroup relations with a lack of prejudice. However, with no intervening forces working to promote relations outside of the companies, there was little development of relationships with either Japanese co-workers or members of the wider community.

The benefits of intergroup contact have been found in numerous studies over decades (Pettigrew et al, 2011). Contact between the trainees and community members, including those who are close in age to the trainees, promises to deliver significant benefits in terms of mutual understanding, learning, and acceptance. Such contact will be instrumental in the acceptance of the trainees not only as labor, but also as residents. The trainees' current status as temporary workers may be helping to maintain generally positive attitudes and treatment of the trainees, as they are not viewed as permanent members of the community. There are concerns that this mindset may change if trainees stay longer and shift to permanent resident status.

Developing friendships with the trainees is one way to reduce the possibility that they will be poorly treated. Proactive efforts are required to forge ties with local community groups, as well as creating opportunities for trainees to meet and interact with Japanese people of their own age group. Japan desperately needs the foreign labor that the trainees provide, but in order to attract and retain the trainees in the midst of regional competition, the ability to develop friendships and put down roots in local communities will be a crucial condition for such settlement. If the trainees are to be encouraged to settle in Japan, they need to have role models to look toward: former trainees who have successfully integrated into and connected with Japanese communities.

This is another area where higher education initiatives are required. The emergence of more multicultural communities represents an opportunity for higher education institutions (HEI) to fulfill their responsibility to contribute to society. The timing is opportune and perhaps overdue to revisit what intercultural education needs to offer and achieve as Japanese society changes.

The intersection of universities' internationalization and third mission initiatives, as proposed by Jones et al (2021), is pertinent here; the current study offers some insight into social groups and communities that may benefit from HEI outreach initiatives aiming for the co-creation of sustainable communities (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020: 18). The majority of the participants in the current study have not received tertiary education and have had limited exposure to intercultural perspectives, including approaches to migrant integration and migrant needs. Enhanced engagement by HEIs with such communities – through training, public lectures, and workshops – could play a crucial role in helping receiving companies and communities prepare emotionally and practically for greater diversity in the local population. In line with the catch cry of UN's SDGs (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2022), addressing such issues will help ensure that no-one is left behind.



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