

This research addendum to Knowledge Report No.2 (Student mobility to Japan in the age of COVID-19: a matter of degree; December 2021) shares data and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on Japan's inbound international student enrollments as of March 2024, utilizing publicly available student mobility data.

**Research addendum:**

**Student mobility to Japan in the age of COVID-19: a matter of degree**

Lauren Nakasato

KAYASHIMA Nobuko

**Revisiting student mobility to Japan beyond COVID-19**

In the four years since the World Health Organization declared a global public health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus has claimed over 7 million lives (WHO, 2024), triggered a world economic crisis (World Bank, 2022) and derailed achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Hughes et al., 2021). In the realm of higher education, COVID-19 has had wide-ranging impacts on the administration and management of higher education institutions themselves, modes and methods of teaching and learning, and various aspects of research and internationalization (UNESCO, 2022). Yet COVID-19 has also triggered innovation and renewal, opening new avenues and ways of thinking in higher education, particularly in the realm of online education (UNESCO, 2022).

This short research addendum is an update on the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development Knowledge Report No.2 published in December 2021 titled "Student mobility to Japan in the age of COVID-19: a matter of degree." The authors reflect on the initial report by examining student mobility to Japan in the four years since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic using updated student mobility data. In the December 2021 report the authors discussed degree-seeking status as a key factor influencing international student enrollment during COVID-19. Four years later, is this still the case? How have enrollment trends changed since 2019?

**Still a matter of degree**

The updated international student enrollment data has largely supported our previous discussion that degree-seeking status of international students influenced students' willingness to study abroad in Japan during the pandemic. The data, drawn from the same

government databases used in 2021<sup>1</sup>, was examined along four axes: 1) time (2019-2022-3); 2) destination country (country comparison between four top study abroad destination countries: US, Australia, Germany and Japan); 3) enrollment status (degree-seeking, non-degree-seeking); and 4) education level (undergraduate, postgraduate).

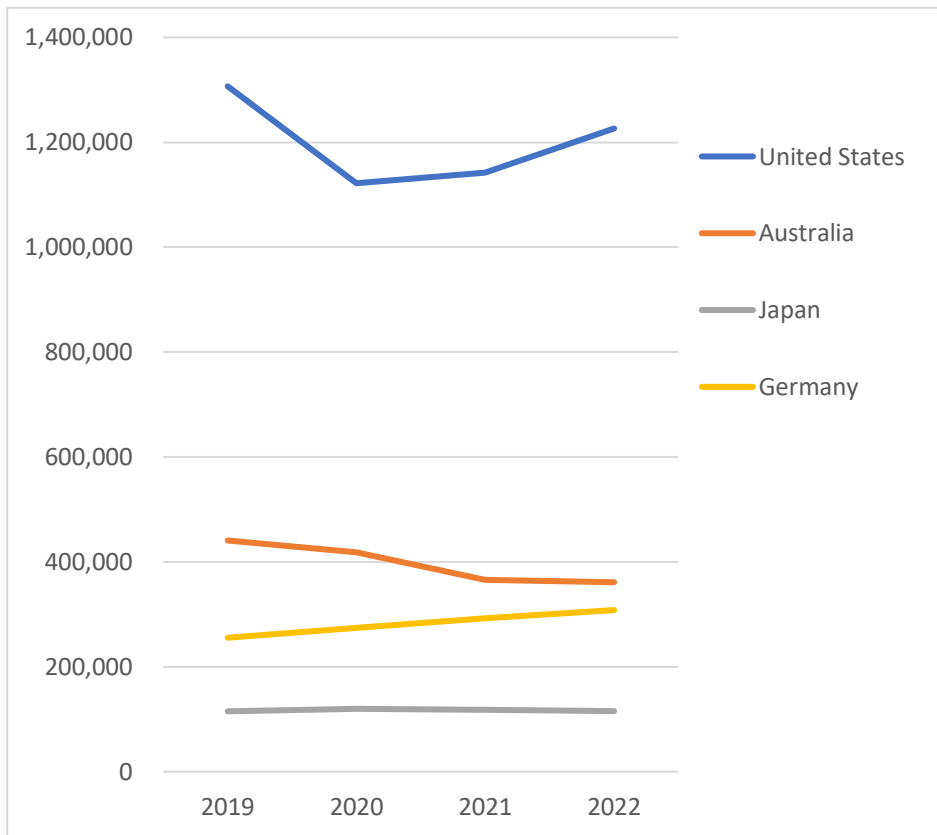
Figure 1 and Figure 2 below compare degree-seeking and non-degree-seeking international student enrollments across four countries (US, Australia, Germany and Japan) from 2019-2022. In these figures undergraduate and postgraduate enrollments are aggregated.

Degree-seeking international enrollments across all four countries (Figure 1) were more consistent throughout the pandemic than non-degree enrollments (Figure 2). This was particularly true for Japan which maintained a steady degree enrollment level throughout the pandemic. Germany's degree enrollment grew over four years, rising 20% between 2019 and 2022. The US observed a 14% decrease in enrollments between 2019 and 2020, the largest drop among the four countries, however enrollments rebound after 2020. Of the four countries, only Australia continues to show a downward enrollment trend, with an 18% drop from 2019 to 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Institute of International Education, Australian Government, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) & German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW).

Figure 1: Country comparison of degree-seeking international student enrollment shifts, 2019-2022



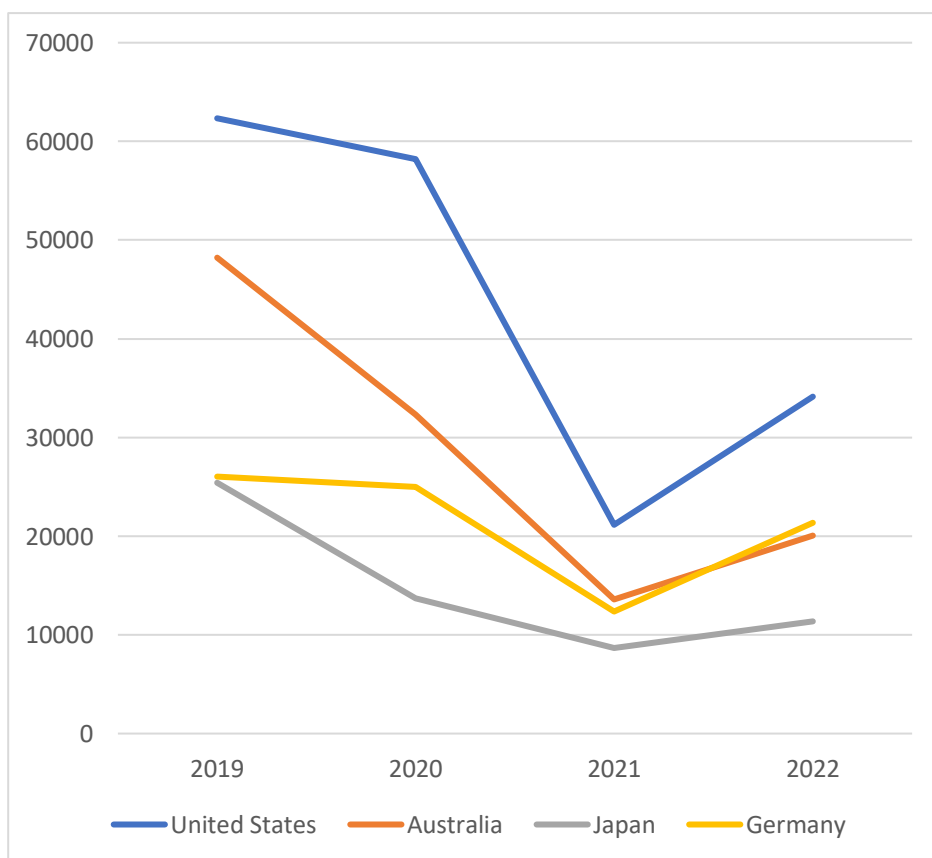
*Source: see Appendix*

While inconsistent definitions of “international student enrollment” among countries make direct comparison difficult, some comments and conjectures can be made. First, the US enrollment figures are based on F-1 student visas, in which “an international student or exchange visitor is deemed active once they enter the United States and engage in their program of study or exchange visitor program” (USICE, 2022, p.2). Thus, US international student enrollments count only students who are physically in the US except for previously enrolled students who got stuck outside of the US due to border restrictions. Further, these figures are based on enrollments rather than individuals; for example, one student enrolled in two programs would be counted as two enrollments. Australia, on the other hand, did not rely on physical presence in their count of international students during the COVID pandemic: “Although enrolment figures would usually refer to people in Australia on student visas, in 2020, due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions, an enrolment does not confirm that a student is currently in Australia” (Ferguson & Spinks, 2020, p.2). While the German and Japanese definitions of international student enrollments are more opaque, in the case of Germany, a 2020 survey of 173 German university

international offices revealed that over 70% of the universities offered “online enrollment through distance education classes” for “international students who could not enter the country” (Kercher & Plasa, 2020, p.15). This implies that those unable to enter Germany were still counted as international student enrollments at some universities. In Japan, due to the near complete border closure during the pandemic, it can be projected that those unable to come to Japan were likely counted as international students if coursework was offered online.

Though degree enrollments proved to be relatively stable in top destination countries throughout the pandemic, non-degree enrollments were more adversely impacted (Figure 2). This was especially apparent in the US and Australia, which saw enrollment drops of roughly 64% and 58% from 2020 to 2021, respectively. Japan and Germany, on the other hand, experienced more modest enrollment drops between 2019 and 2021. Further, non-degree international student enrollments have been increasing in all four countries since 2021, although none have yet reached pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 2: Country comparison of non-degree-seeking international student enrollment shifts, 2019-2022



Source: see Appendix

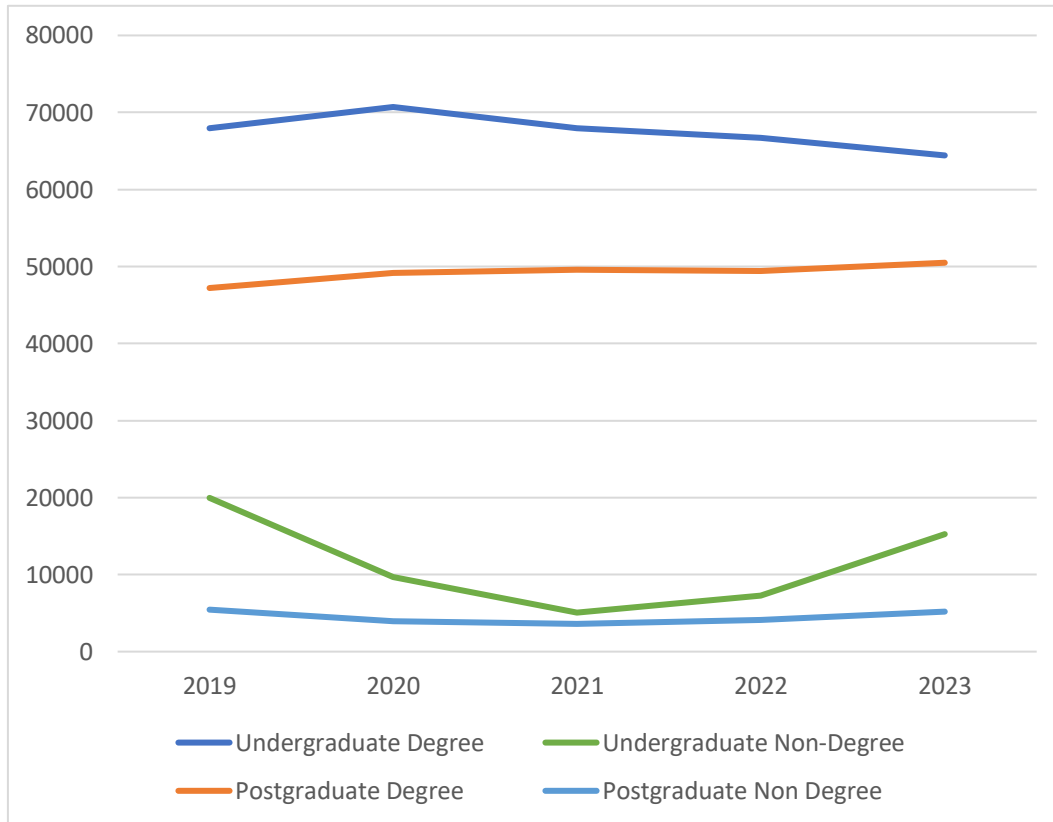
The December 2021 Knowledge Report discussed degree-seeking status as a key factor influencing international student enrollments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This discussion appears to hold across four years of data as degree-seeking enrollment has remained relatively flat while non-degree enrollment has been more volatile. As previously discussed, such enrollments have likely been influenced by the changing status of exchange programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the German case, 45% of 173 universities surveyed in 2020 had not canceled any exchange programs for the summer 2020 semester while only 22% had canceled all exchange programs (Kercher & Plasa, 2020). This is in stark contrast to the US, in which 83% of universities surveyed by the Institute of International Education (IIE) completely suspended exchange programs for the summer 2020 semester (Kercher & Plasa, 2020).

### **Spotlight on Japan: international enrollments by degree and educational level**

A closer look at the Japan case examines how international enrollments differ when disaggregating both degree status and educational level. Figure 3 below parallels the enrollment trends for degree-seeking undergraduates and postgraduates (dark blue and orange lines, respectively) with those for non-degree-seeking undergraduates and postgraduates (light green and light blue lines, respectively). For degree-seeking students, educational level made less of a difference between 2019 and 2023, although undergraduate student enrollments are trending downward (roughly 5% decrease between 2019 and 2023) as graduate student enrollments are trending upward (roughly 7% increase between 2019 and 2023).

For non-degree-seeking students, however, a dramatic difference between international student enrollments at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels can be observed. As discussed in the December 2021 Knowledge Report, this is likely due to the abrupt halt of exchange programs during the pandemic. The nearly symmetrical curvature of the undergraduate non-degree line (green) indicates a robust rebound from the stoppage during the pandemic, implying that exchange programs have indeed resumed. On the other hand, the lack of fluctuation in postgraduate non-degree-seeking enrollments may be a reflection of a larger proportion of non-degree research students as opposed to exchange students at the postgraduate level.

Figure 3: Degree-seeking and non-degree seeking international students in Japan by undergraduate/postgraduate status, 2019-2023



Source: see Appendix

The data presented above indicate that Japan’s international student enrollment has been relatively resistant to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic over four years, perhaps due in part to larger numbers of degree-seeking students and diversification of international programming at Japanese universities. While a deeper dive into the reasons behind this stability is beyond the scope of this short research addendum, the authors hope the presented data will provide a springboard for further research and discussion.

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## Appendix

The following tables provide the raw numbers used to generate the graphs in the report.

**Table 1**

**Country Comparison of Tertiary International Enrollment Shifts by Degree Status 2019-2022**

	Degree-seeking (BA, MA, PhD)			Non-degree-seeking <sup>1</sup>		
	2019	2020	% change	2019	2020	% change
United States <sup>2</sup>	1,306,869	1,121,981	-14.10%	62,341	58,201	-6.60%
Australia <sup>3</sup>	440,824	418,375	-5.09%	48,219	32,330	-32.95%
Japan <sup>4</sup>	115,154	119,890	+4.11%	25,411	13,683	-46.15%
Germany <sup>5</sup>	255,478	274,285	+7.36%	26,035	24,959	-4.13%

	Degree-seeking (BA, MA, PhD)			Non-degree-seeking <sup>1</sup>		
	2020	2021	% change	2020	2021	% change
United States <sup>2</sup>	1,121,981	1,142,352	+1.82%	58,201	21,151	-63.66%
Australia <sup>3</sup>	418,375	365,714	-12.59%	32,330	13,589	-57.97%
Japan <sup>4</sup>	119,890	117,474	-2.02%	13,683	8,667	-36.66%
Germany <sup>5</sup>	274,285	292,115	+6.50%	24,959	12,363	-50.47%

	Degree-seeking (BA, MA, PhD)			Non-degree-seeking <sup>1</sup>		
	2021	2022	% change	2021	2022	% change
United States <sup>2</sup>	1,142,352	1,226,231	+7.34%	21,151	34,131	+61.37%
Australia <sup>3</sup>	365,714	361,247	-1.22%	13,589	20,067	+47.67%
Japan <sup>4</sup>	117,474	116,094	-1.17%	8,667	11,370	+31.19%
Germany <sup>5</sup>	292,115	308,124	+5.48%	12,363	21,354	+72.73%

*Note.* Table 1 categorizes student enrollment into “degree-seeking” and “non-degree-seeking” as judged by the authors using data from multiple sources as listed below. The authors acknowledge discrepancies in categorization and definitions between the data sets as explained in the following footnotes.



<sup>1</sup> Excludes those enrolled in vocational and certificate programs.

<sup>2</sup> Degree-seeking students includes students enrolled in associates degree programs.

<sup>3</sup> Degree-seeking students include graduate certificate/diploma students, students taking MA coursework or performing MA research, and students in preliminary/qualifying programs prior to MA/PhD matriculation.

<sup>4</sup> “Degree-seeking” students are categorized as regularly-enrolled students and those other than regularly-enrolled students (auditing students, research students, advanced course students and short-term course students) are categorized as “non-degree-seeking”.

<sup>5</sup> Data only available for winter semester of each year.

Sources: Computed by authors using data from United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023); Institute of International Education (2024); Australian Government (2024); Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b); German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) & German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW) (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023).

**Table 2**

***Change in International Students Enrolled in Japanese HEIs by Program Type 2019-2023***

		Number of international students (percent total)		
		2019	2020	% change
<b>Undergraduate</b>	Total	87,911	80,409	-8.53%
	Degree-program	67,949 (48%)	70,709 (53%)	4.06%
	Non-degree-program <sup>1</sup>	19,962 (14%)	9,700 ( 7%)	-51.41%
<b>Postgraduate</b>	Total	52,645	53,164	0.97%
	Degree-program	47,205 (34%)	49,181 (37%)	4.19%
	Non-degree-program	5,449 ( 4%)	3,983 ( 3%)	-26.90%
<b>Total</b>		140,565 (100%)	133,573 (100%)	-4.97%

		Number of international students (percent total)		
		2020	2021	% change
<b>Undergraduate</b>	Total	80,409	72,985	-9.23%
	Degree-program	70,709 (53%)	67,919 (54%)	-3.95%
	Non-degree-program <sup>1</sup>	9,700 ( 7%)	5,066 ( 4%)	-47.77%
<b>Postgraduate</b>	Total	53,164	53,156	-0.02%
	Degree-program	49,181 (37%)	49,555 (39%)	0.76%
	Non-degree-program	3,983 ( 3%)	3,601 ( 3%)	-9.59%
<b>Total</b>		133,573 (100%)	126,141 (100%)	-5.56%

		Number of international students (percent total)			
		2021	2022	% change	
<b>Undergraduate</b>	Total	72,985	73,956	1.33%	
	Degree-program	67,919 (54%)	66,691 (52%)	-1.81%	
	Non-degree-program <sup>1</sup>	5,066 ( 4%)	7,265 ( 6%)	43.41%	
<b>Postgraduate</b>	Total	53,156	53,508	0.66%	
	Degree-program	49,555 (39%)	49,403 (39%)	-0.31%	
	Non-degree-program <sup>1</sup>	3,601 ( 3%)	4,105 ( 3%)	14.00%	
<b>Total</b>		126,141 (100%)	127,464 (100%)	1.05%	

		Number of international students (percent total)			
		2022	2023	% change	
<b>Undergraduate</b>	Total	73,956	79,664	7.72%	
	Degree-program	66,691 (52%)	64,418 (48%)	-3.41%	
	Non-degree-program <sup>1</sup>	7,265 ( 6%)	15,246 (11%)	109.86%	
<b>Postgraduate</b>	Total	53,508	55,650	4.00%	
	Degree-program	49,403 (39%)	50,487 (37%)	2.19%	
	Non-degree-program <sup>1</sup>	4,105 ( 3%)	5,136 ( 4%)	25.77%	
<b>Total</b>		127,464 (100%)	135,314 (100%)	6.16%	

*Note.* While the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) also publishes detailed data on international student enrollments, MEXT's annual "School Basic Survey" is based on the enrollment records of each university and data does not include data from vocational/technical colleges and junior colleges.

<sup>1</sup> Includes students enrolled in non-degree short-term courses, credited auditor/auditor students and research students.

Sources: MEXT (2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b).