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*Migration, displacement and education:  
Building bridges, not walls*

## **HIGHER EDUCATION POSSIBILITIES FOR AND CONSTRAINTS ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN JAPAN**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This chapter focuses on the integrated information-provision system for international credential evaluations. In 2011, UNESCO initiated a convention that promotes establishing systems to provide information on higher education to assist proper evaluation and recognition of qualifications in its member states in the Asia-Pacific region. Accurate evaluation of qualifications and prior learning is the key to fair and prompt treatment for both immigrating and emigrating students. To examine the possibility and feasibility of corresponding to the convention, a series of surveys was implemented in order to clarify how international admission offices in Japan evaluate international qualifications for recognition, how foreign agencies evaluate qualifications issued by Japanese higher education institutions and, what the need is for integrated information service on both sides. This chapter analyzes the results of this survey to interpret the current status of international credential evaluation and its challenges that led the Japanese government to officially take part in the convention in order to realize a public service to protect rights of students coming and going across borders to study.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of higher education, there are various predicaments about the environments where prospective international students who wish to study in Japan are situated. In addition, problems can be found with Japanese higher education institutions as receiving institutions for international students.

This chapter focuses on the topic of providing essential information for international credential evaluation. Attracting international students has become increasingly important for Japanese institutions for either gaining tuition income or keeping in accord with government initiatives for internationalization of higher education, or both. Currently, the share of international students is not high in Japan compared with other systems: 3.4% of all undergraduate enrollment consists of international students, as of 2017 (calculation based on MEXT, 2017). If we look at a previous year for comparison, its share in 2015 reported through OECD was 2.4%, while the OECD average was 4.3% (OECD, 2017). However, the Japan Student Service Organization (JASSO) reports that the total number of international students in all kinds of Japanese institutions was 188,384 as of spring 2017, with an annual growth rate of 10.1% from 2016 enrollment (JASSO, 2017). Partly because of this increase of international students immigrating to Japan, the assessment of credentials that international prospective students bring has become more important. Consequently, the national government became interested in developing support systems for foreign credential evaluation to make it possible for institutions to properly assess international qualifications.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) delegated a task to National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE), an independent administrative agency, to make a national survey to identify the type of support needed in international credential assessments. Based on the results of this survey, this chapter will clarify how Japanese institutions assess the credits and qualifications of international applicants at both undergraduate and graduate levels. It will also analyze the necessary public support, such as the development of National Information Center (NIC). This will make possible not only fair recognition of prior learning of international students by both Japanese and foreign institutions, but also informed college choice by international prospective students in the specific context of Japanese higher education.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In the second section, the present status, and emerging issues, of international student admission at Japanese higher education institutions, in relation to the profile of the system, will be explained. In the third section, we will look at the results of a survey that was conducted to determine the demand for an information-provision system to support individual institutions both inside and outside Japan, in evaluating and recognizing foreign academic credentials. In the fourth section, possible responses to issues and demands mentioned in the preceding two sections will be determined, along with challenges that the responses may face. This chapter mainly examines how a public information provision

system will contribute to lessening constraints and widening possibilities for students who cross borders and higher education institutions that receive them.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

The majority of Japanese 4-year institutions do not closely examine the authenticity of documents and/or accreditation status of home institutions of international students who are transferring to Japanese institutions. As of 2017, there were 780 higher education institutions that granted bachelor's degrees or higher, and their profiles are dissimilar. Therefore, their motivations to attract international students are also different. But they do have one thing in common: lack of an information-provision service for foreign credential evaluation that all institutions can commonly use for effective and consistent evaluation to assist student mobility.

### **2.1 Private-dominant system and governmental initiatives**

In examining the process of international credential evaluation performed by individual institutions, it is necessary to discuss a major demographic change in Japan: the decline of the younger population. It should also be noted that tuition income has been crucial for institutions in Japan: 77% of the above-mentioned 780 degree-granting institutions are private. Partly for that reason, only 34% of national total higher education cost is covered by public expenditure, while the average proportion in OECD countries is 70% (OECD, 2017).

Given the decline of potential tuition-paying student cohort, maintaining enrollment is imperative for institutions — especially private ones — in order to ensure sound learning and research environments. Some people claim that Japanese institutions do not want to lose opportunities to admit tuition-paying international students by asking questions about their backgrounds that are too rigid and/or demanding. One of the extreme examples of admission to sustain institutional existence is the case of a junior college where MEXT revealed that this 2-year institution had accepted over 200 international students, with the majority of them actually working in Tokyo for salary. The main motive for the junior college to accept those students, — when they knew that the majority of students were not going to actually take classes — was to secure tuition income and governmental support that were allocated on the basis of number of admitted students. Later, that junior college closed down (Japan Times, 2002).

This case was quite extreme, but admitting international students is a possible way for higher education institutions to gain income. There are numerous financial support programs, including tuition waivers and discounts, but those programs do not cover the entire population of international students. For example, the

Japanese Government Scholarships program covers full tuition fees, living expenses and travel expenses of selected international students. When an international student is not under this Japanese Government Scholarships program or is not completely financed by his or her home government, he or she is categorized as a privately-financed student in official statistics. As of 2017, there were 267,042 international students studying in Japan. Among them, 9,166 were under the Japanese Government Scholarships program and 3,760 were supported by other governments, meaning more than 95% of international students were privately-financed (JASSO, 2017). A survey on privately-financed international students conducted by JASSO finds that 36.7% of them are receiving some kind of scholarship aid (JASSO, 2016): So more than 60% of self-financed students are paying full cost for education and living. Unless they are waived or discounted, tuition fee schedules for international students are identical with those for local students. Therefore, from the viewpoint of higher education institution, international students are a potential resource of tuition revenues. In fact, in 2010 under the then administration, the Cabinet approved a strategy to recommend higher education institutions --- especially private ones --- to accept more international students, so “Japan will actively invite students from overseas and work to ensure the development of private-sector educational services in appropriate ways in order to generate demand for education and make education an area of growth” (The Cabinet, 2010).

Meanwhile, other researchers argue that potential tuition income is not a strong motivation for private institutions to attract international students. Yonezawa (2009) categorizes Japanese higher education institutions into two types: “top” research-oriented universities and others, and points out that for both types of institutions, governmental initiative works as the major driving-force for internationalization. According to Yonezawa, research-oriented universities have an additional incentive for internationalization: to compete in international arena of research.

As seen above, financial stability through extra tuition income brought by international students directly may or may not be a strong motivation for Japanese institutions to attract more overseas applicants. In either case, however, governmental initiatives for internationalization of higher education institutions can be certainly observed. For instance, under the Comprehensive Support Program for Reform of Private Higher Education Institutions, which started in 2013, MEXT provides differently weighed financial support in accordance with the extent of reforms by private institutions, including the extent of internationalization. And the extent of internationalization can be determined by numeric indicators including, obviously, the share of international students.

This leads us to a question: Has the Japanese higher education system been equipped with sufficient infrastructure to help institutions perform effective and fair evaluation of international credentials to protect the rights of prospective international students, while the government simultaneously encourages international admission?

## 2.2 Possible problems

In reality, it has been speculated that Japanese institutions generally do not closely evaluate the authenticity or accreditation status of institutions sending international students.

At the same time, however, it should be pointed out that in Japan there exists no integrated information system designed to assist institutions in assessing foreign credentials; these are found in European countries: ENICs or NARICs (ENIC/NARICs, hereafter). Likewise, activities of private or quasi-private professional services to evaluate international transcripts or diplomas by contract, such as those found in the United States, are very much limited in Japan. Because of this lack of integrated information provision, it has been believed that fair and prompt assessment of international students' prior learning is often insufficient. Since the time, budget and manpower that institutions can spend on international credential evaluation vary from one institution to another, efficiency and accuracy of their evaluation may also vary. Moreover, when we look at the daily task of international credential evaluation, there is sometimes redundancy of processes and inconsistency of conclusions within the whole system, with individual offices at different institutions work on same application document to, possibly, come to very different conclusions.

On the other way around, similar problems can be pointed out in the practice in evaluation of credentials earned at Japanese institutions: Because of the lack of a unified and comprehensive information system for international users, Japanese transcripts and diplomas can be treated in other systems in redundant and inconsistent ways.

## 3. STATUS QUO OF FOREIGN CREDENTIAL EVALUATION: IMMIGRATION AND EMIGRATION

As part of the measures to address the problems mentioned above, the National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE) initiated a survey under contract with MEXT in 2014, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter (NIAD-UE, 2016). The ultimate motive of MEXT to have this survey done was to determine the feasibility of establishing a public organization to assist higher education institutions in evaluating international credentials. The organization would do this in accordance with the orientation shown by the Convention initiated by UNESCO, Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (UNESCO, website).

### 3.1 Outline of the survey

The purpose of the survey was 1) to understand the practice of foreign credential evaluation done by Japanese institutions, 2) to get idea of the appreciation of Japanese credentials by institutions in other systems and 3) to examine the need for a national center in Japan that provides national and international credential information that may assist the mobility of both immigrating and emigrating students. To achieve this purpose, NIAD-UE implemented a national survey of all degree-granting institutions in Japan for goal 1) above. The national survey consisted of two parts: undergraduate programs and graduate programs. Each part was again divided in two parts: one about international credit evaluation and the other about international diploma evaluation. As shown in **Table1**, about 400 academic and administrative staffs responded to each part.

As part of this project, NIAD-UE also conducted an international survey, looking at 57 ENIC/ NARICs in states that had ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which entered into force in 1999 to promote mutual recognition of higher education credentials mainly in Europe, for goal 2). The survey got 24 responds in this part (NIAD-UE, 2016).

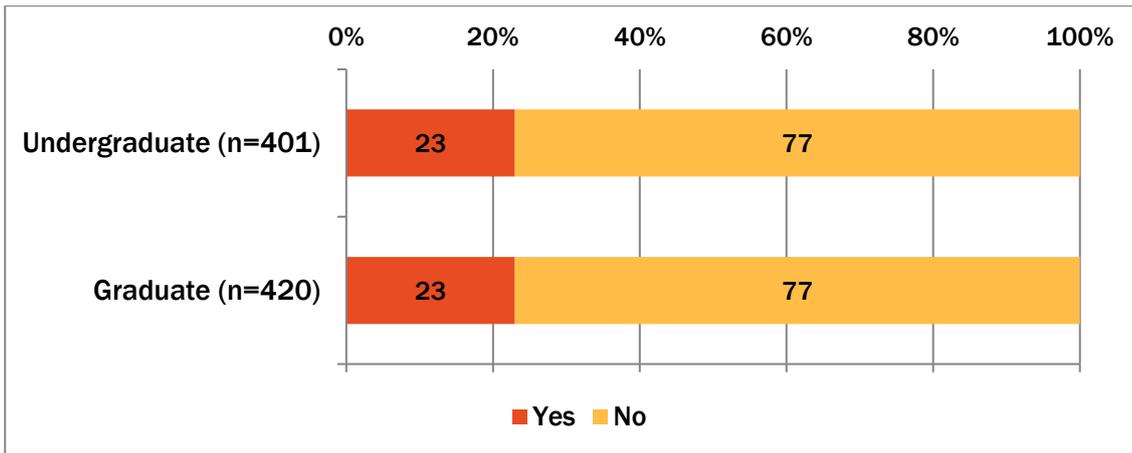
**TABLE 1: RESPONSE TO ALL TYPES OF NATIONAL SURVEYS**

Evaluation of international credits		Recognition of international credits	
Undergraduate	Graduate	Undergraduate	Graduate
484	368	469	425

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

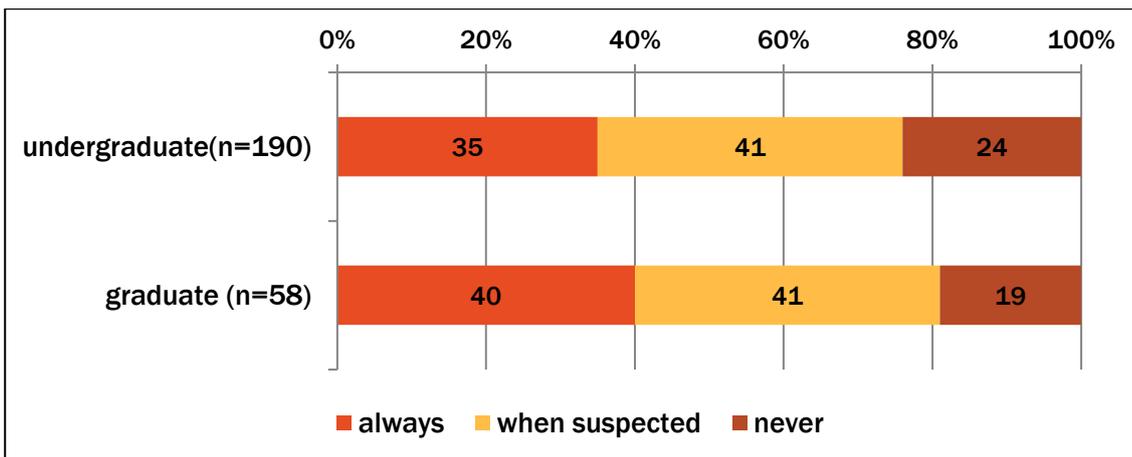
### 3.2 Information needs survey: student immigration

The survey finds, in the first place, that only 23% of international admission offices have a prescribed process to determine the authenticity of all submitted documents (**Figure 1**). In the same manner, 35% of all surveyed offices, check accreditation status of all home institutions with no previously-evaluated records in terms of undergraduate



**Figure 1: Offices in charge of international admission with due process to determine the authenticity of submitted documents**

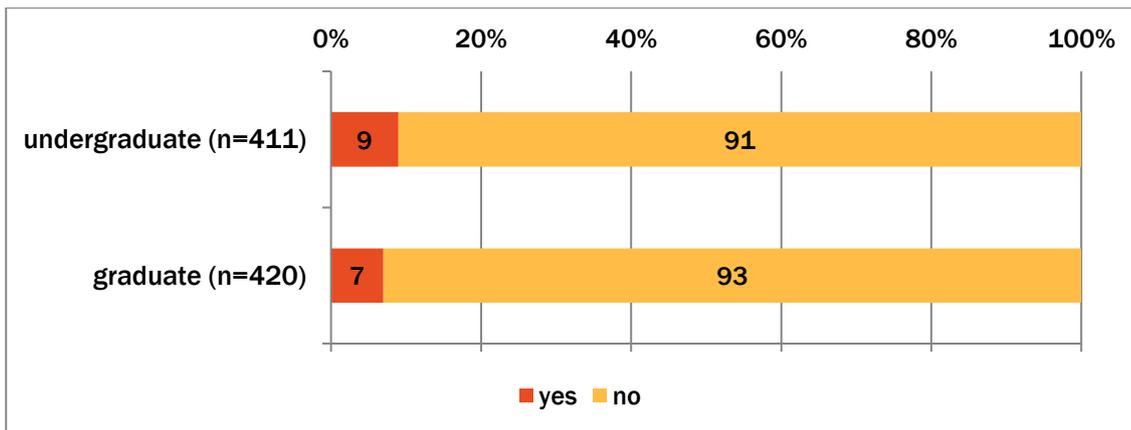
Source: NIAD-UE, 2016



**Figure 2: Frequency of checking of accreditation status of an applicant's home institution without institutional credit-transfer contract**

\* n shows number of responders who have experienced evaluating international credentials issued by institutions with no credit-transfer contract.

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016



**Figure 3: Officers in charge of international admission who have suspected the authenticity of submitted documents**

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

programs. For graduate programs, the proportion is 40% (Figure 2). And it was also revealed that, based on their personal experiences, only 9% of admission officers at undergraduate level and 7% at graduate level nationwide have questioned the authenticity of documents submitted by prospective international students (Figure 3).

This does not prove that less than 10% of all applications to institutions in Japan are really viewed as suspicious. Instead, it suggests that the Japanese international application process has been insufficiently informed about questioning the authenticity and/ or adequacy of international transcripts.

Given that the authenticity of credentials, including those of the issuing institutions themselves, have not been closely examined in the process of international admission to Japanese institution, it is reasonable to assume that there are some other mechanisms working to ensure the academic readiness of prospective international students. Table 2 shows the variety of dominant measures that institutions employ to assess the qualifications of international applicants at undergraduate and graduate levels. Evidently, a large majority of international students are being admitted through examinations given in Japan in all types of establishment: Admission based solely on documents such as transcripts and diplomas is not common. Thus, the majority of international prospective students come to Japan to take examinations without knowing if they will be successfully admitted to the institutions they want to enter. This is exactly the point that the governmental campaign, the *300,000 Foreign Students Plan* of 2008, hopes to improve. This plan has set a numerical goal: to increase the number of foreign students admitted to Japan to 300,000 by 2020. In this

**Table 2: Major methods of selection of students in international admission at by type of establishment**

	Examination in country	Examination in home country	Examination in Japan	Documents	Others	Total
<b>Undergraduate</b>						
National public	10.9%	73.4%	10.9%	4.7%	100.0%	
	(7)	(47)	(7)	(3)	(64)	
Local Public	8.7%	87.0%	4.3%	0.0%	100.0%	
	(2)	(20)	(1)	(0)	(23)	
Private	21.2%	67.8%	8.2%	2.7%	100.0%	
	(31)	(99)	(12)	(4)	(146)	
Total	17.2%	71.2%	8.6%	3.0%	100%	
	(40)	(166)	(20)	(7)	(233)	
<b>Graduate</b>						
National public	10.4%	64.6%	20.8%	4.2%	100.0%	
	(10)	(62)	(20)	(4)	()	
Local Public	0.0%	85.7%	14.3%	0.0%	100.0%	
	(0)	(18)	(3)	(0)	(21)	
Private	8.6%	79.3%	7.9%	4.3%	100.0%	
	(12)	(111)	(11)	(6)	(140)	
Total	8.5%	73.7%	13.1%	3.9%	100.0%	
	(22)	(191)	(34)	(10)	(259)	

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

plan, it is proposed to make Japanese higher education more accessible by widening opportunities for international entrance examinations. The Plan especially points out the downside of currently- dominant admission practices that make it almost impossible for international prospective students to complete application at home (see Sugimura, 2015).

Based on **Table 2**, it is also presumable that international students, even at the undergraduate level, come into Japan with visa statuses other than college student, as long as they were actually in Japan when the entrance examinations were given. This presumption encourages the discussion of the functions of Japanese language schools in Japan.

**TABLE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF INSTITUTIONS AND STUDENTS OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE SCHOOLS BY TYPE OF ESTABLISHMENT**

Type of establishment	Higher education institution	Municipal institution/ board of education	International association*	Registered private institution	Total
<b>Number of institutions</b>	521 (25%)	416 (20%)	411 (19%)	763 (36%)	2111 (100%)
<b>Number of students</b>	56,672 (26%)	23,200 (11%)	32,365 (15%)	105,644 (48%)	217,881 (100%)

\*quasi-municipal institutions

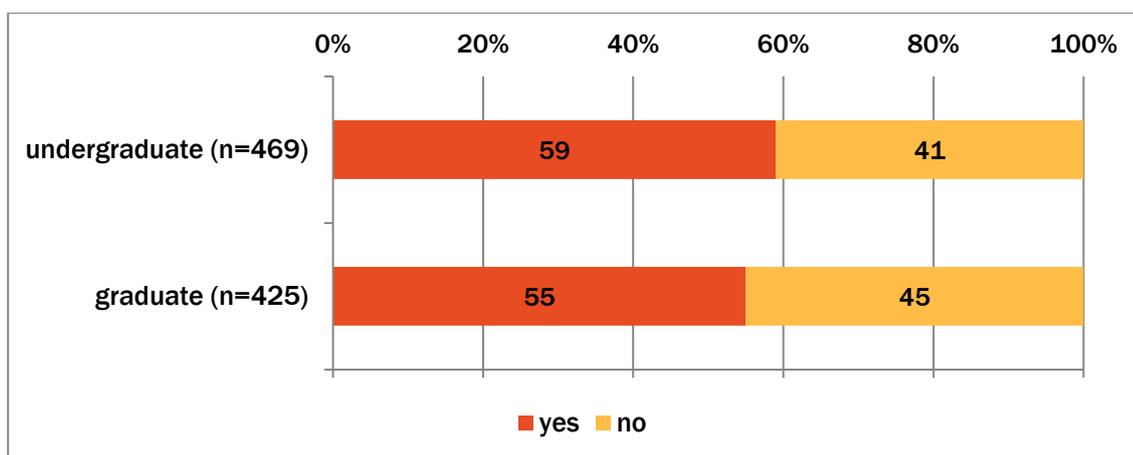
Source: Agency of Cultural Affairs, 2016

According to the 2016 annual survey on Japanese language schools taken by the Agency of Cultural Affairs, a quarter of the language students are studying in language schools attached to higher education institutions, while the majority of language students (48%) are in private institutions under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice (**Table 3**). Available data show that the students' regional backgrounds at higher education institutions are: Asia (84.0%), Europe (6.4%), North America (4.0%) and Africa (1.3%). At other types of establishments altogether, the distribution is: Asia (83.6%), South America (4.1%), North America (2.6%) and Europe (2.5%). In both cases, as can be seen, the vast majority of language school students are from Asian states (Agency of Cultural Affairs, 2016). According to another survey conducted solely on registered private

institutions, of 30,684 language students who completed programs at surveyed institutions in 2016, 23,183 (75.6%) of them immediately proceeded to higher education programs at either universities/ junior colleges or special training colleges (Association for the Promotion of Japanese Language Education, 2018).

These private institutions are eligible for visa qualifications. Moreover, being admitted to a private language institution as a student means that he or she has completed secondary education in his or her at home state, prerequisite for admission to Japanese higher education institutions.

Therefore, these Japanese language schools serve not only as language education for foreign students but also in legal background check for those students. This latter function of language schools can be seen as a result of limited transferability-checking at higher education institutions. On contrary, higher education institutions have come to greatly rely on the screening function performed by language schools in checking prerequisites for enrollment. There can be found a reciprocal relationship between higher education institutions that are able to outsource the function of background checks, and language schools that can attract students. In this context, the NIAD-UE survey also evinces that there is reciprocity between higher education institutions and language schools: Less than 60% of international admission officers in Japanese institutions found an integrated information service on international qualifications for smooth assessment of foreign credentials necessary (**Figure 4**). This is partly because there are Japanese language schools that already do international credential evaluation in practice. It should be noted that in this type of survey question, less 60% of positive answers was not as high as expected.



**Figure 4: Officers who finds necessity of integrated information provision on foreign credentials**

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

This reciprocity eventually prevents the improvement suggested in the *300,000 Foreign Students Plan*: making it possible for international prospective students to complete admission processes to Japanese institutions without coming to Japan. The issue here is the possible inconvenience of prospective

international students in terms of time and financial load required. Apparently, the model of evaluation of international prerequisites outsourced to language schools was circumstantially established. If an integrated information provision system had been established, it would have helped institutions to complete the student selection process before the students come to Japan. Next question is whether a new system of information provision could replace the established outsourcing model that has previously been involved in business activities.

### 3.3 Information needs survey: student emigration

From another point of view, the need for an integrated information provision about Japanese credentials among foreign institutions was previously unknown. Therefore, the NIAD-UE survey also focused on information demanded by ENIC/ NARICs in order to assist smoother admission of students who emigrate with credentials issued by Japanese institutions. It surveyed 57 ENIC/ NARICs and got 24 responses. Of these 24 responses, 19 had dealt with Japanese credentials. The states that those 19 ENIC/ NARICs are located and frequency of assessment of Japanese credentials by them are shown in **Table 4**.

**TABLE 4: FREQUENCY OF ASSESSMENT OF JAPANESE CREDENTIALS BY ENIC/ NARICs**

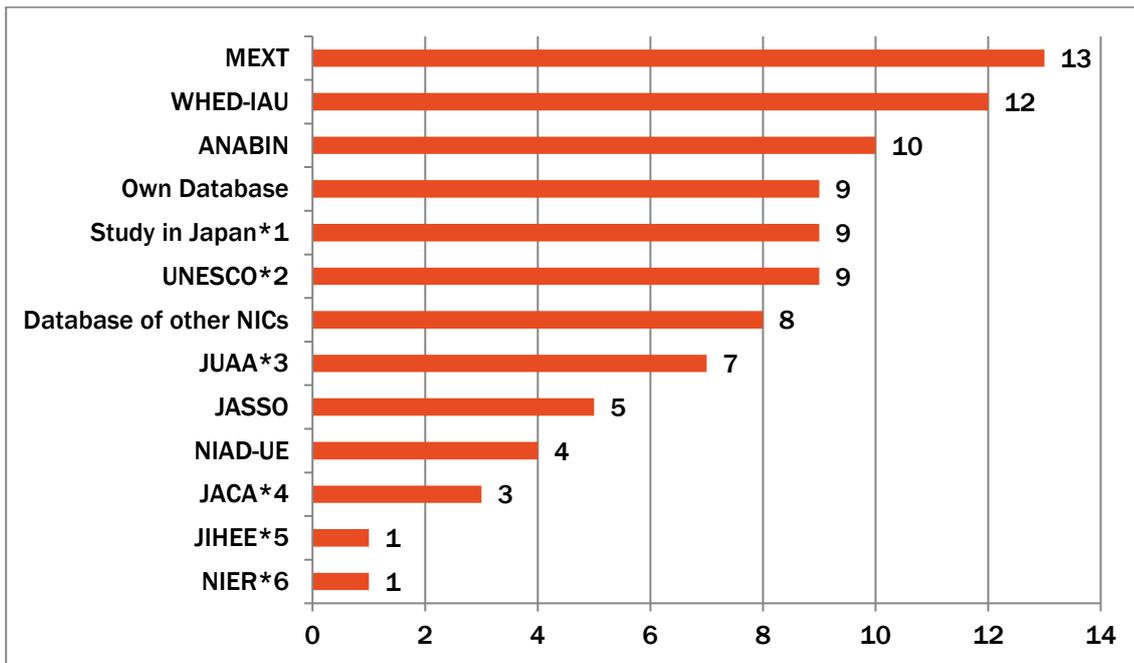
Frequency of assessment of States Japanese credentials (annual)	
100+ times	UK, New Zealand
50-99 *	Germany
20-49	Australia
10-19	Norway, Denmark
1-9	Estonia, Finland, Greece, Poland, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Unnamed**
0-1	Croatia, Ireland, Slovenia, Belgium(French community)

\* Swedish center indicated that number of annual inquiries, not assessments, fell under this range of 50-99.

\*\* Of 24 respondents, one center was anonymous.

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

Analyzing response from these 19 ENIC/ NARICs, an outline of information-demand at foreign evaluation centers was made possible. It also clarified what kind of process ENIC/ NARICs use in their daily evaluation practice as organizations that are designated as National Information Centres (NICs). Thus, the overall results from international survey can be referred to when Japanese authority develop their own NIC.



Note: Multiple answers were possible. n=19

\*1 Study in Japan: A website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan that provides comprehensive information regarding studying in Japan.

\*2 UNESCO Portal to Recognized Higher Education Institutions had been active until shortly before the survey was implemented.

\*3 JUAA: Japan University Accreditation Association

\*4 JACA: Japan Association for College Accreditation

\*5 JIHEE: Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation

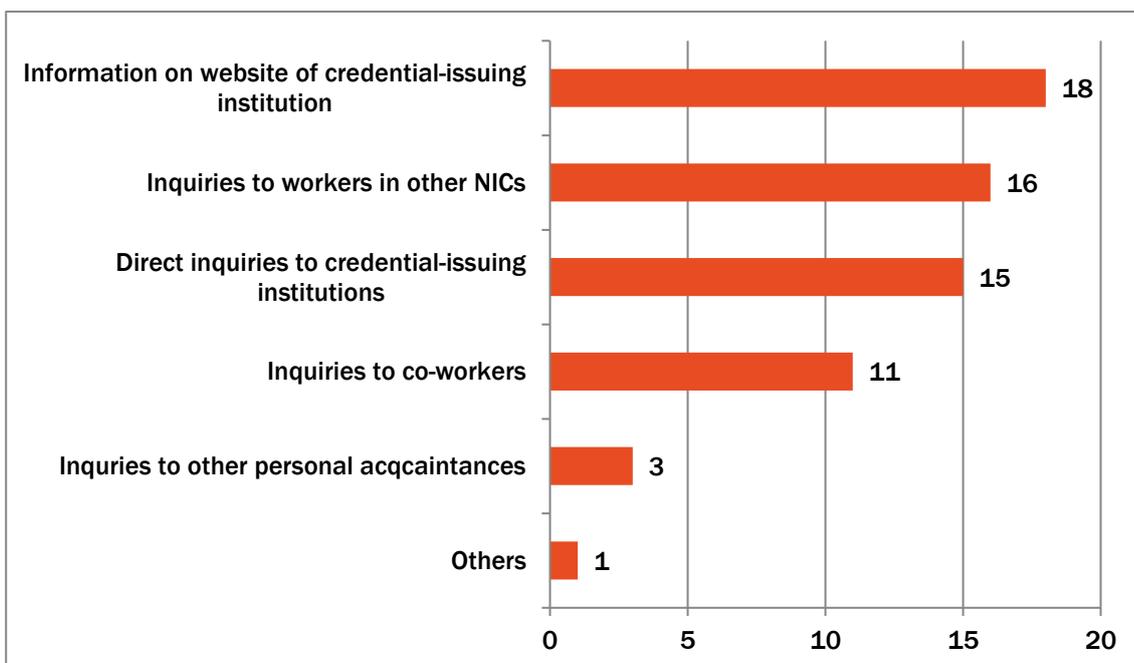
\*6 NIER: National Institute for Educational Policy Research

**Figure 5: Collective information sources ENIC/ NARICs rely on in assessing Japanese credentials**

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

It was found that, among numerous of collective information sources, the most dependable was provided by MEXT at its website *Universities, Junior Colleges and Colleges of Technology* (MEXT, 2017b). *World Higher Education Database* provided by International Association of Universities (WHED-IAU) and Anerkennung und Bewertung ausländischer Bildungsnachweise (ANABIN), a German information service were also good sources, as shown in **Figure 5**.

The survey also inquired about information sources other than those collective efforts listed in the **Figure 5**. It was found that those collective information sources are not always sufficient. To assess Japanese qualifications, personnel at ENIC/ NARICs utilize information directly acquired from Japanese institutions that have issued the credentials in question. They also rely on knowledge of individuals in their network (**Figure 6**).



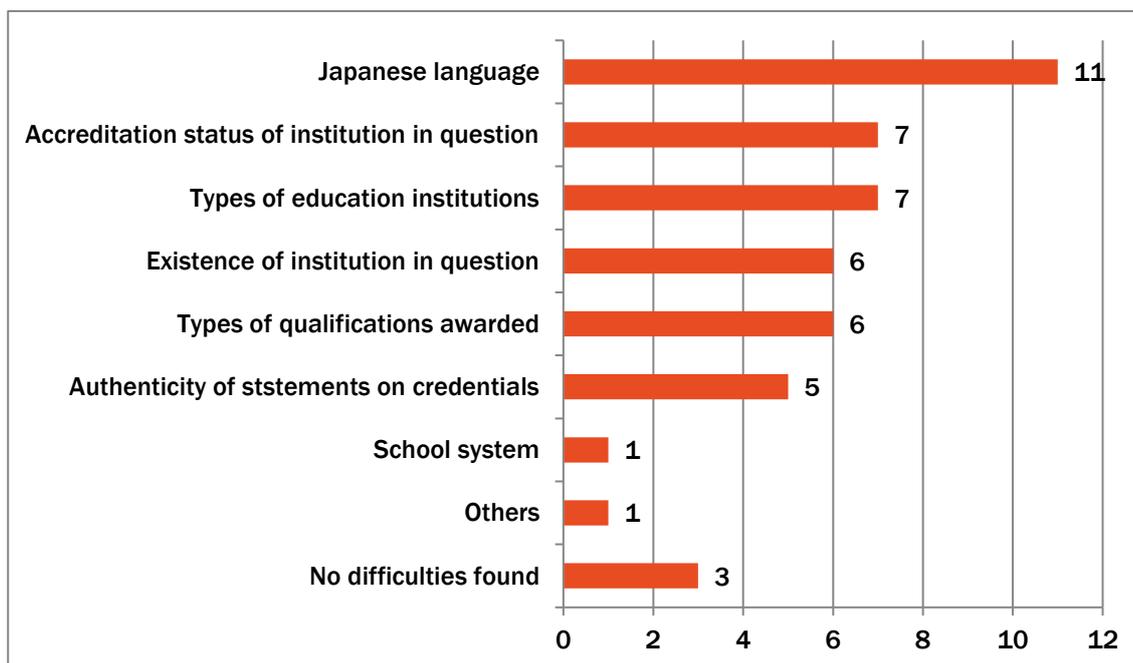
Note: n=19

**Figure 6: Additional information sources that ENIC/ NARICs rely on in assessing Japanese credentials**

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

Assuming that personnel at surveyed ENIC/ NARICs obtain necessary information through various channels, then what kind of difficulties do they experience in determining value of Japanese credentials to assure their equivalencies to those of their home systems? **Figure 7** shows areas that respondents find difficult to understand regarding Japanese certifications. Aside from Japanese language, which 11 of them find difficult,

understanding the general system of higher education — such as types of institutions and/ or qualifications, and the value of individual certifications including



Note: n=19

**Figure 7: Areas ENIC/ NARICs find difficult in assessing Japanese credentials**

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

their authenticity — were found to be difficult to assess. So when an integrated information provision system is established in Japan, that system should be, ideally, equipped with functions to 1) explain overall school systems, corresponds with various types of institutions with various types of qualifications, and interrelations of different types of qualifications, and 2) assist evaluating individual credentials — if not doing direct assessment of Japanese credentials for international institutions — by providing detailed information about individual higher education institutions.

The survey also found a need for information about historical transition of institutions, and regulations on qualifications. On the issue of changes of regulations, for example, one survey respondent indicated that the difference between two kinds of diplomas that junior colleges issue was not clear. Currently, junior colleges confer degrees called *Tanki-Daigakushi* which were called *Jungakushi* through September 2005. Meanwhile, *Tanki-Daigakushi* and *Jungakushi* are both translated in English as: associate degree. As the unchanged title in English may suggest, the legal status of junior-college diplomas has not changed. And those who earned *Jungakushi* before 2005 are considered equal to those who have earned *Tanki-Daigakushi*, the new title. Contrary to the commonsense assumption, in this case, ENIC/ NARIC personnel with ability in Japanese

language might have been confused because the title changed only in Japanese while the title in English remained the same.

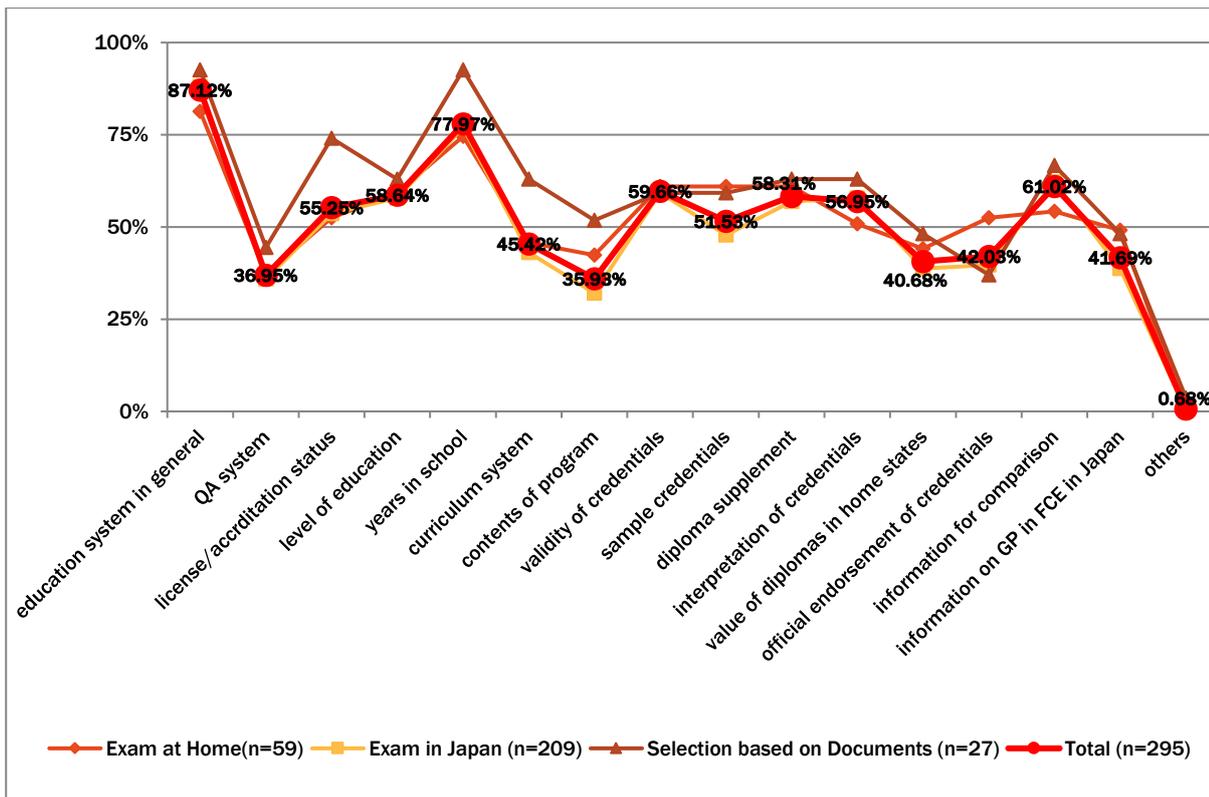
Accordingly, once integrated information-provision has established, it should ensure access not only to current status but also to historical development of the overall system and, ideally, individual institutions.

### 3.4 Assessment based on regulations

Having examined the current status of credential evaluation of immigrating and emigrating students at the level of higher education, it is reasonable to assume that, even if there is no integrated system for information provision — as NIC — in Japan, some other elements combine to perform the subsidizing and practical function to help higher education institutions to evaluate international credentials. Especially in terms of immigrating students, Japanese language schools have been functioning as the primary control screen for international admission, as already mentioned above.

Furthermore, there is one particular regulation on international admissions in Japan that apparently makes it possible for higher education institutions to admit international students without closely examining their academic prerequisites. This regulation is: the Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Law, and it clearly states that colleges and universities can only admit international students who have 12 years of school education in their home states, in principle. It is true that this Ordinance also prescribes, in the footnote, that “school education” in this sense means education provided by “legitimate” schools. This footnote, which recommends consulting with the appropriate diplomatic establishment in Japan to confirm the legitimacy of schools, is apparently the only provision that defines what school education actually means: There are no detailed descriptions in the regulation about structural elements that ensure their legitimacy.

It is presumed that partly because of this, the majority of international admission processes focus on the length of school education that applicants have experienced in their home states, without sufficient guidance to examine the legitimacy of the schools in other education systems. This tendency can be seen in **Figure 8**, which shows the variety of information about applicants being focused in the process of international admission at the level of undergraduate. Regardless the main method of selection for admission by institutions, Japanese institutions pay more attention to the number of years that applicants have spent in schools (78%) than: the state licensing or accreditation status of the sending institution (55%), the curricula system (45%) or quality assurance system that the school has (37%).



**Figure 8: Areas of information focused on in international undergraduate admission**

Source: NIAD-UE, 2016

From this **Figure 8**, it can be seen that the absence of detailed information about definition of “legitimacy” of sending schools, along with the impact of regulation by the Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Law (defined as 12 years of school education), results in discounts on legal transferability that may be ensured by examination on licensing/ accreditation status, curricula or systems of quality assurance.

Given the above, once an integrated information-provision has been established, it should provide not only necessary information but also professional training for personnel in charge of international admissions, in order to nourish the practice and the ability in international credential evaluation nationwide.

#### **4. POLICY ATTEMPTS TO FACILITATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY AND THEIR CHALLENGES**

Considering the status quo of foreign credential evaluation of immigrating and emigrating students, it has become a political concern to establish a system to facilitate international student mobility where fair and proper treatment of students’ prior learning is assured.

Simultaneously, there was a related concern about an international convention: Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education initiated by UNESCO. As mentioned in the beginning of the previous section, the Japanese government was becoming interested in the possibility to get membership in this Convention. The Convention was opened for signature in 2011 in Tokyo, which is why this Convention is commonly called as the Tokyo Convention 2011. The ultimate purpose of the Tokyo Convention 2011 was, replacing the 1983 Bangkok Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific, to make 1) holders of qualifications issued in one of the Parties would have adequate access, upon request to the competent recognition authority to an assessment of these qualifications in a timely manner, and 2) in order to assure this right for holders of qualifications, each Party would undertake to make appropriate arrangements for the assessment of an application for recognition of qualifications with the main focus on knowledge and skills achieved. The Convention also provides that each Party shall take adequate measures for the development and maintenance of a national information centre (NIC) that will provide higher education information. (UNESCO, website).

#### **4.1 Potential benefits**

Based on analysis of the results of the survey, NIAD-UE temporarily concluded that, to some extent, both Japanese and foreign higher education institutions would benefit if an NIC was established in Japan to some extent, especially in assisting Japanese institutions (Ifuku et. al., 2015; NIAD-UE 2016). It was pointed out that not NIC, but each higher education institution is responsible for the final word on admission. However, it would be helpful for institutions, in evaluating and recognizing international credentials in a fair manner, to have a third-party information-provision service for foreign credential evaluation that all institutions can commonly use (Ifuku et. al.). Moreover, if an NIC provides sufficient information, it may accelerate international admission using only documents such as diplomas and transcripts. This will enable prospective students to follow the admission process without coming to Japan before enrollment.

Furthermore, by introducing well-informed evaluation of international credentials by more institutions in Japan, and that of Japanese credentials by foreign institutions, prospective students will be more accurately treated. This will improve the current situation, where only 23% of admission offices in Japan have a routine process to check authenticity of home institutions. Likewise, students with Japanese credentials will be evaluated in a timelier manner by foreign institutions. Here, accuracy should be emphasized as the key to fairness: Not only underestimating but also overestimating would be disadvantages in both personal learning readiness and equity of learning opportunities among prospective students as a whole. An NIC in Japan would probably be able to assist in such well-informed evaluation.

## 4.2 Challenges

On the other hand, there can be pointed out several challenges in establishing and managing an NIC in Japan: These challenges can be found both inside and outside higher education institutions in Japan.

Challenges found inside institutions can be summarized as the readiness of institutions. There are three questions here: 1) Will the admission process be able to shift from high dependence on written/ oral entrance examinations to inspection of diplomas and transcripts? 2) Will institutions be able to secure and train personnel with sufficient skills to inspect various international credentials to make maximum use of the value of information provided by the NIC? 3) Will it be possible for institutions to examine not only the length of school education but also prospective students' academic attainments? The first question is related to the behavioral pattern of higher education institutions, which is deeply rooted in the academic culture in Japan characterized by high dependence on, and trust in, examinations. As mentioned earlier, the Japanese government recommends that higher education institutions facilitate international admission processes by completing them without requiring prospective students to come to Japan to take examinations/ interviews. However, as is already seen in **Table 2**, more than 70% of international admission offices choose examinations in Japan, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as the main method for international admission. This tendency has been supposedly generated by the preference for direct assessment of academic preparedness of prospective students, institutions are accustomed to use in selecting students both locally and internationally. Apparently, there is a contradiction between suggested facilitation and confidence formed through practice. The second can be rephrased as a question about the spare time and energy that institutions may or may not spend on personnel training considering the shrinking higher education market. The last question seems to be relatively hard to realize: shifting the focal point from education format to learning outcomes while the 2011 Tokyo Convention recommends granting qualification recognition unless there are so-called "substantial differences."

Meanwhile, challenges found outside institutions are related to business models that have developed because of the lack of an integrated information-provision system, such as NIC. Specifically, if an NIC is established as part of, in all probability, public authority, it could become a remarkable competitor for Japanese language schools that have been practically functioning as: independent information providers, qualification evaluators and, in most cases, determiners of immigration status for prospective international students. On the NIC side, if it is ever established, NIC will have to train personnel with sufficient skills in interpreting various international credentials from the start to help institutions. Therefore, the key question is: Will possible NIC and existing Japanese language schools be able to cooperate to provide better service for prospective students and, at the same time, avoid numerous disadvantages in existing Japanese language schools that have formed their business models around vested demands from international students? market confusion?

### 4.3 Political attempts

Taking the entire situation and survey results mentioned above into consideration, MEXT opted to take necessary steps to establish an NIC for information provision. Accordingly, the cabinet of the government passed a resolution in favor of access to the 2011 Tokyo Convention on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018. On the following day, deposit of instruments for the accession was made to UNESCO by a Japanese delegation in Paris. Two weeks later, the Republic of Korea also ratified the 2011 Tokyo Convention. As a result, the Convention entered into force and, correspondingly, it brought an international commitment for the Japanese government to promote fair and timely evaluation of academic credentials of both immigrating and emigrating students, and also to establish an NIC for that promotion.

Consequently, the Japanese government must either newly establish an organization like NIC, or nominate an existing organization to perform NIC-like functions. The next step for the Japanese government is to design an organizational structure and produce the financial foundation required to administrate the NIC. Whether the NIC is either established or simply nominated, it will have to address all the challenges listed above, along with the government.

## CONCLUSION

As seen in this chapter, Japan is currently taking small but important steps to ensure the fair and appropriate treatment of foreign students' credentials by establishing an NIC as an aid for immigrating and emigrating students of higher education. Though it is not clear what kind of arrangements should be made to accommodate the provisions given in the 2011 Tokyo Convention, there should be an agent to protect the rights of both immigrating and emigrating students. What is clear, now that the Convention has entered into power, is that the Japanese NIC should be equipped with functions to provide: 1) a domestic information-sharing system for foreign credential evaluation that will reduce redundancy of efforts and measure information asymmetry among institutions, 2) an international information-disclosure system to assist in evaluation of Japanese credentials by foreign institutions, 3) organized training for professional admission officers at higher education institutions, (and possibly NIC personnel), 4) frequent review of the legal framework of international admissions to include the concept of learning outcomes and 5) cooperation with existing agencies — other than higher education institutions — that perform functions of international credential evaluation to make potential changes reciprocal for both societies of higher education, and private businesses that have been working with these institutions for some time.

It is fair to say that, once it begins to work sufficiently and properly as is planned, the 2011 Tokyo Convention will change the landscape of immigration and emigration of students in Japan by promoting accurate and speedy provision of information on academic credentials, if it works, sufficiently and properly. For Japanese institutions, it is possible to take advantage of this change to shift from over-reliance on the length of school education to deeper consideration of learning outcomes in home countries. It would also be an opportunity to promote an international students' admission process that does not require prospective students to travel to Japan beforehand. These two changes will contribute to protecting the rights of prospective international students with various backgrounds of academic experience.

The establishment of the NIC is now under active consideration by the government: The stage of discussing whether we would establish it is finished. The essential question is: How will it be established? In conclusion, whatever form the Japanese NIC may take, the prime concern is to protect the rights of immigrating and emigrating students by accurate international credential evaluation and fair treatment of students' prior learning.

#### Note

1. National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE) was reorganized as the National Institution for Academic Degrees and Quality Enhancement of Higher Education (NIAD-QE) after the survey, effective April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

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