THE J-FIND VISA: ACADEMIA'S BEST ARE NOT ENOUGH TO FIX JAPAN'S DEMOGRAPHIC DILEMMA

ALEXANDRA K. SCOTT

Alexandra K. Scott (akscott2025@gmail.com) *is a research intern at Pacific Forum and a rising senior at Pomona College studying International Relations and Japanese Language and Culture. She has previously interned with the Global Chamber, an international chamber of commerce, and served as an assistant teacher of English at Tokyo City University (東京都市大学). She also studied abroad in Kyoto while living with a host family and honing her language skills. Her research interests include demographics shifts and immigration policy in the Indo-Pacific, cybersecurity, culture and soft power, and Northeast Asian security.*

Faced with aging populations and declining birth rates, developed countries are scrambling to attract the best and brightest that immigration has to offer. Like many nations, Japan, long reputed as ethnically homogeneous and restrictive to immigration, has had to relax its immigration policies to ensure economic success and security. The creation of the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa in 2019 marked a pivotal point for Japan in opening its doors to foreign workers, especially those previously absent from the "skilled" category. With the situation growing more dire, Japan announced the creation of two new visa policies in 2023: the J-Skip and the J-Find visas. The J-Skip visa allows researchers, engineers, and those with business management experience to, as its name implies, skip the points-based system if they have a certain income and a certain amount of professional experience. Under the J-Find visa, graduates from "highly ranked universities" can live in Japan for up to two years while seeking employment or conducting start-up preparation activities.

A positive development…but a restrictive one

The new visas are no doubt a step in the right direction for a country historically closed off to immigration, and the J-Find visa is novel in allowing graduates to reside in Japan without securing employment. However, for a university to meet the J-Find requirement of being "highly ranked," it must appear in the top 100 of at least two of three listings: QS Top Universities, Times Higher Education's World University Rankings, or Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities. Japan's decision to implement this requirement is understandable, as a strong university reputation is a common measure of a graduate's skills and ability to contribute to the Japanese workforce. However, limiting the J-Find visa to only these university graduates restrict the labor pool for a country in desperate need of new manpower. For example, such universities are out of reach for many individuals due to their tremendous financial cost, meaning qualified and motivated workers from other backgrounds fall under the radar. Smaller liberal arts colleges or vocational schools would also not appear in any of the three listings exclusively designated for universities. Furthermore, studies have argued that university rankings are not a definitive measure of an individual employee or an education's quality, as degree programs often vary within a single institution.

Demographics, and national security, in crisis

Japan cannot open its doors to everyone, of course. Arguments against increased immigration warn of the dangers that open borders have for national security, public order, and cultural stability. However, the nation's demographic situation has reached a point where limiting immigration poses a greater threat. Japan's median age stood at 49.5 years in 2023, one of the oldest in the world. Its current population is predicted to shrink by a quarter in 40 years, a loss equal to the population of Malaysia or Peru. An older population means fewer able or willing workers, which also means less productivity. In addition, more seniors mean increased spending on elderly care while the number of people able to provide that care dwindles. In fact, for households with an individual 65 or older receiving care, the caregiver is often also older than 65.

As the elderly population increases, birth rates are simultaneously plummeting. Japan's fertility rate was 1.2 in 2023 (well below the sustainable rate of 2.1), and the number of babies born dropped 5.6% from the previous year. Japan's traditional values mean that births out-of-wedlock are rare, and an additional 6% decrease in marriages only exacerbates the problem. This combination of an aging population and a declining birth rate poses challenges to the nation's society, economy and, ultimately, its survival.

A demand for labor at every turn

With demographics in crisis, labor shortages are numerous and distressing. Software engineering, IT, and healthcare are often highlighted as areas in high demand. Indeed, some of the most popular majors at top universities across the world (business, health professions, engineering, computer science, and IT) are a fitting match for these needs, and the J-Skip visa targeting researchers, engineers, and business managers also seeks to address this demand. However, the need for labor expands beyond these areas, requiring diverse solutions and personnel. For example, major shortages in the childcare industry aggravate the country's alarming birth rate decline. Concerns regarding China's growing assertiveness and North Korean missile tests have led Japan to boost its defense spending, but a lack of personnel remains a critical concern. Smaller cities are at risk of disappearing due to the population plummeting and need young entrepreneurs with new ideas to bring life back to these dying regions.

The road forward

Japan understands the severity of its demographic dilemma. In March 2024, the government revealed its plan to double the number of SSW visas for the next five-year period from 345,000 to 800,000. Perhaps an expansion of the J-Find visa to include a wider range of qualifying candidates can assist the country in its security crisis. Universities with a good reputation are likely to produce high-performing graduates, so keeping the current lists as one form of assessment is reasonable. However, other metrics of talent should be included as alternative ways to qualify. Standardized tests or writing assessments are possibilities, but these face backlash for placing certain populations at a disadvantage. Another possibility is to look at individual programs within institutions. For example, Japanese language proficiency and cultural understanding are highly valued because they ease migrant integration, and certain regions pay foreign nationals to take classes on prefectures and their dialects before coming to work. Including schools with nationally acclaimed Japanese programs for consideration (many of which are not represented in conventional world university rankings) would bring in candidates with language skills, a cultural interest, and an increased willingness to overcome cultural obstacles.

Taking a more traditional security viewpoint, an overall increase in population under a wider pool of qualifying migrants would simultaneously ease the Japan Self Defense Forces' (JSDF) recruitment challenges in the face of growing Indo-Pacific tensions. The JSDF faces an uphill battle competing for recruits against the higher salary and stable life of the business world, and Japan's postwar pacifist ideologies invoke further wariness. Although the government has made efforts to increase wages and benefits for SDF personnel, policies like a relaxed hairstyle requirement or an increased age bracket seem ineffective in the face of the bigger population issue. The JSDF is currently only open to Japanese nationals. However, an overall increase in residents combined with increased benefits for SDF personnel would encourage Japanese nationals toward the military while a highly educated immigrant population supports Japan's economic sector. Over time, the recruitment pool would expand with the acculturation of later generations of migrants. Alternatively, the SDF could recruit foreigners to join by creating a pathway to naturalization in exchange for a commitment to service. This would require more resources devoted to training migrants in both Japanese language and defense force training, but the manpower reward would be strong.

If Japan hopes to overcome its demographic crisis, it must look beyond mere prestige and consider innovative alternatives to immigration policy—the nation's survival may well depend on it.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.