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# From Vocational Schools to Universities: Navigating Educational Permeability for Vietnamese Students in Japan

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## Abstract

This article explores how Vietnamese international students in Japan navigate the transition from vocational education to university, using the concepts of "institutional permeability" and the "education-migration industry." Findings from qualitative interviews revealed that while vocational-to-university pathways exist, they are obscured by structural barriers and informational gaps perpetuated by study-abroad agencies and institutional practices. The study identifies three types of vocational schools—vocation-oriented, hybrid, and further-education-oriented—with varying degrees of support for academic progression. Educational mobility is shown to be stratified and conditional, highlighting the need for more transparent and equitable systems to support international students' academic aspirations.

## Keywords

access to university; educational mobility; international student mobility; Japan; Vietnamese students; vocational education

## 1. Introduction

In July 2008, the Japanese government, under Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, introduced a plan to accept 300,000 foreign students as a part of a "global strategy" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology [MEXT], 2008, p. 3) that Hennings and Mintz (2015, p. 244) saw as door openers for "highly qualified international students." These "outstanding international students" (*yūshūna gaikokujin ryūgakusei*) enrolling in Japanese universities were deemed "global talents" (*gurōbaru jinzai*). The government expected them to play an important role in both the internationalization of Japanese higher education and the development of the Japanese economy (MEXT, 2014; Nomiya & Takahashi, 2022).

While the plan focuses on attracting and retaining students from international universities, it has resulted, in practice, in bringing in students from developing countries like Vietnam or Nepal, who end up enrolling in language academies and vocational schools. In the hierarchy of educational institutions, these students are seen as a somewhat less desirable group of international students in Japan, being often referred to in pejorative terms such as "fake students" or "labouring students" (Akira, 2010; N. T. K. Cao, 2022; Idei, 2019; Kawakubo & Kawakubo, 2022; Sellek, 1994). While there are studies that explore why international students choose vocational education (see Nohata, 2023) and why they choose to work in Japan after graduation (Mazumi, 2021, 2023), how international students move from vocational schools to universities in Japan is a subject that is still missing from the current literature. While government policies associate non-Japanese vocational graduates with the newly introduced Specified Skilled Workers (SSW) visa, a visa category that focuses on low- and middle-skilled sectors with no degree requirement (MEXT, 2021, p. 9), little attention has been given to vocational students' educational mobility. This perspective prioritizes their role in the workforce over their academic aspirations, often overlooking their potential and aspirations to pursue further education.

Although there is a credit transfer system between vocational schools and universities for international students in Japan (Japan International Cooperation Center [JICE], 2024), its utilization remains minimal. In 2023, only 8.5 percent of international students pursued further education after completing vocational school, highlighting the limited permeability between vocational education and universities in Japan. This low transition rate raises concerns about the polarization of international students' educational trajectories. On one side, vocational school graduates are funnelled into the low- and middle-skilled labour market, reinforcing their role as a labour supply for Japan's workforce. On the other hand, university students are seen as the "desirable international students" that Japan aims to attract for the internationalization of its higher education system. These two contrasting educational pathways are closely tied to structural challenges that make it especially difficult for vocational students to overcome institutional obstacles and gain access to university education. This article explores the educational mobility trajectory of international students in Japan, from vocational education to universities, using the experiences of Vietnamese students, the largest population of non-Japanese students in vocational education as of March 2024.

I propose to address the following questions: How do Vietnamese students navigate their path from vocational training to universities? How do Japanese vocational schools facilitate this transition? Understanding this route is crucial for several reasons: These students represent a group that defies the typical "channel" in vocational education—i.e., leading directly to employment—by instead focusing on academic and professional aspirations beyond what is expected of them. Their experiences offer insights into the permeability of Japan's education system and the role of institutions in either enabling or hindering the mobility of international students. By shedding light on the aspirations and challenges faced by Vietnamese students, this article contributes to broader discussions on the educational mobility of international students in host countries and institutional permeability.

To answer the research questions, I first present the context of vocational training and its connection to higher education in Japan. Section 2 discusses the conceptual framework of the study: the "education-migration industry" and the institutional permeability in the educational mobility of international students. Section 3 presents the data and how they were gathered and analysed. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the main findings of the research, focusing on international students' access to higher education in Japan and the categorization of vocational schools based on how effective they are in transitioning students to

universities. The research concludes that vocational students aspiring to pursue university education encounter significant challenges largely due to information gaps perpetuated by the education-migration industry. Additionally, Japanese vocational schools exhibit varying levels of support, depending on their classification as vocational-oriented, hybrid, or further education-oriented.

## 2. Vocational Training and Pathways to Universities for International Students in Japan

### *2.1. Japanese General Educational System*

Japan is currently hosting more than 368,000 non-Japanese students enrolling in different educational institutions (MEXT, 2024). Figure 1 illustrates the pathway to Japanese higher education for international students.

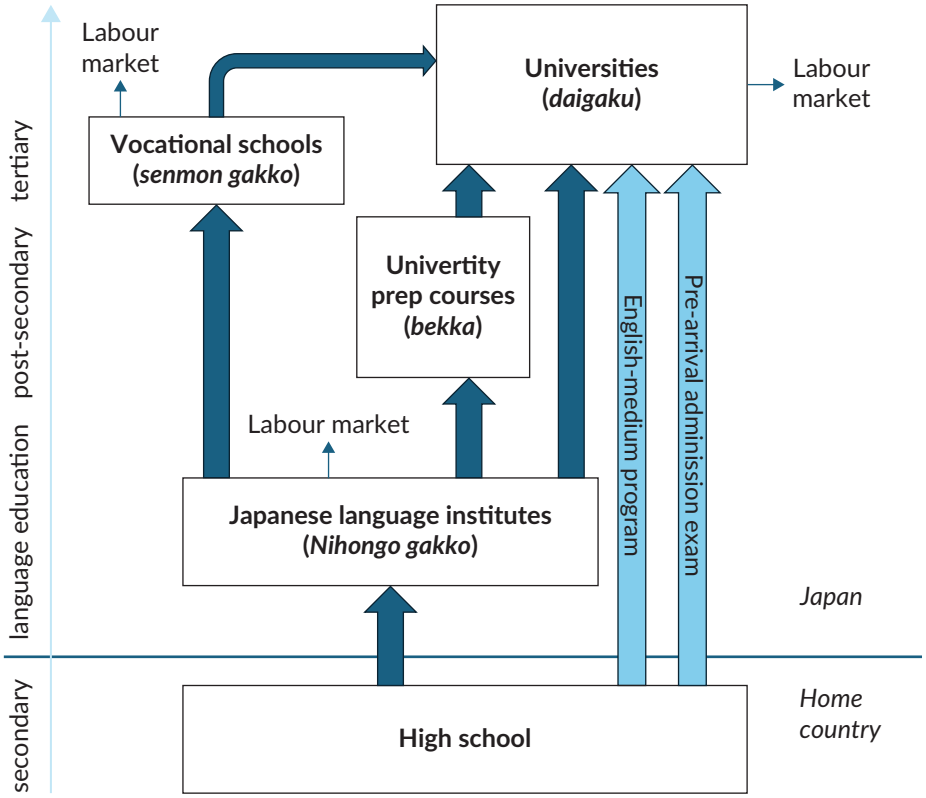


**Figure 1.** Pathway to higher education in Japan from overseas.

International students generally start their journey by enrolling in Japanese language institutes (Liu-Farrer, 2011). In 2023, the number of international students enrolled in Japanese language institutes exceeded 90,000 (MEXT, 2024). According to MEXT (2021), many foreign students from Japanese language education institutions learn Japanese intending to pursue higher education in Japan, and about 80 percent of the students remain in Japan after graduating from language academies. These institutes equip students with linguistic skills for life in Japan, teach them about Japanese culture, and provide post-graduation consultation. Language schools offer a structured curriculum designed to prepare students for academic and professional life in the country. Many schools align their courses with the Japanese-language proficiency

test (JLPT) and require the test results as graduation criteria. Students typically spend two years in language schools before moving on to the next stage of their education. A small number of international students can join the labour market directly because they already have college degrees; they are, thus, qualified for an ESHIS visa (engineer/specialist in humanities/international services) or can easily obtain a Specified Skilled Worker visa. Around 10 percent of language school graduates joined the labour market in 2022 (Japanese Students Support Organization [JASSO], 2024).

Students who wish to continue their education (*shingaku*) have the choice to apply for vocational schools (*senmon gakko*) or universities (*daigaku*). Vocational schools generally have lower entry requirements compared to universities. Admission to vocational schools typically involves an interview, a simple written test, and/or a document review, with minimal or no standardized exam requirements. In contrast, universities—particularly public and prestigious private institutions—set higher admission standards. Most universities require students to take the Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students (EJU), which assesses proficiency in subjects like Japanese language, mathematics, science, or humanities, depending on the chosen major (Study in Japan, n.d.-a). Additionally, many universities have their own entrance exams, which may include written essays, interviews, and subject-specific tests. These requirements make university admission more competitive and demand a strong academic foundation.

An option for students who may not meet the language or academic requirements for direct university admission is enrolling in university preparatory courses (*bekka*). These programs are operated by universities and provide structured training in Japanese, subject-specific knowledge, and university entrance exam preparation. As of 2023, there are 42 universities in Japan offering *bekka* programs specialized in Japanese education (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2023, p. 27). University preparatory courses typically last one to two years and focus on intensive Japanese language education, Japanese culture, and Japanese affairs. Some schools also provide academic skill classes such as note-taking and reading strategy, or general courses like English or Mathematics (Kansai University, n.d.). Overall, the goal is for international students to acquire the necessary skills for higher education in Japan.

On the other hand, recent shifts in Japan's international education policies have introduced alternative pathways to universities for foreign students. The plan to accept 300,000 foreign students has played an important role in the surge of international students in Japan, especially in universities. The plan has encouraged universities to launch pre-arrival admission processes, allowing students to apply to universities by submitting EJU scores from overseas. For "the promotion of the globalization of universities," it has also contributed to the increased number of English-medium programs, which enable students to enroll directly in Japanese universities without needing prior Japanese language skills (MEXT, 2008). As a result, international students with a strong academic background but limited Japanese proficiency can access higher education without going through the traditional language school route. While English-based programs offer opportunities for internationalization, they are still limited in number and tend to be concentrated in a small number of institutes. Statistics from JASSO show that, as of 2021, only 50 in 788 universities in Japan are offering programs in English, a proportion of 6.3 percent (JASSO, 2021).

While the percentage of international students who transition to post-secondary education is high (74.8 percent), in 2023, 64 percent of these students enrolled in vocational schools instead of universities and graduate schools after completing their language education (Association for the Promotion of Japanese

Language Education [APJLE], 2025). The number of Nepalese and Vietnamese students pursuing education in vocational schools is significantly higher compared to other nationalities. Notably, in 2021, 83 percent of Nepalese and 84 percent of Vietnamese students who graduate from Japanese language schools continued their education in vocational schools (APJLE, 2023).

### *2.2. Japanese Vocational Schools and the Path to Universities for International Students*

In Japan, vocational schools—officially designated professional training colleges or specialized training colleges (*senmon gakko*)—are recognized by the MEXT as part of the higher education system. According to MEXT (2015), these institutions correspond to the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level 5 (short-cycle tertiary education), also known as non-university higher education. This level is characterized by programs that are shorter than university degrees, typically lasting at least two years but generally less than three, and focusing on practical, technical training and vocational skills closely aligned with employment outcomes.

In this article, these colleges are referred to as vocational schools for consistency. These institutions equip students with the skills, techniques, and knowledge necessary to initiate and progress in their careers, while also enhancing their general education. At vocational schools, students can acquire a wide range of qualifications, including specialized knowledge and skills across eight fields: (a) technology, (b) agriculture, (c) medical care, (d) personal care and nutrition, (e) education and welfare, (f) business practice, (g) fashion and home economics, and (h) culture and liberal arts (MEXT, n.d.).

With the rapidly shrinking Japanese student population—resulting from a declining birth rate—private Japanese vocational schools see international students as a golden opportunity to fill the vacancies (Liu-Farrer, 2011). In 2019, 215 out of 291 (73.9 percent) Japanese vocational schools reported that they did not fulfil their quotas, with an average of only 64 percent of their total capacity filled (Nikkan Gendai, 2019; The Promotion and Mutual Aid Corporation for Private Schools of Japan, 2021). With a shortage of students, vocational schools turn to international students. A recent government survey found that, in 2019, 871 vocational schools in Japan were accepting international students. Of those schools, 195 reported that international students made up more than 50 percent of their student bodies, while the proportion of non-Japanese students was 90 to 100 percent in 145 vocational schools (MEXT, 2019). Many vocational schools, aiming to attract more international students despite their over-representation, have evolved into *ryūgakusei-muke senmon gakkō*—schools oriented specifically towards international students with courses that cater specifically to non-Japanese learners, such as interpretation or translation (Le, 2022).

Two types of vocational programs confer different qualifications based on the duration and intensity of study. Students who complete a program lasting at least two years (with a minimum of 1,700 instructional hours) are awarded a Diploma, which allows them to transfer to a university. Those who complete a more advanced four-year program (with at least 3,400 instructional hours) receive an advanced diploma, which equals a bachelor's degree and qualifies them for enrollment in graduate school. These institutions serve as both career-focused training centres and potential stepping-stones for further academic advancement (Study in Japan, n.d.-b). In 2023, approximately 85 percent of international students enrolled in two- or three-year vocational programs, while only 3.5 percent were in four-year advance diploma programs (Tosenkaku, 2023). The remaining students enroll in training courses that allow them to graduate within one

year without a diploma; popular courses include (a) Japanese language, (b) dental hygiene, and (c) nutrition and cooking.

Students who meet specific criteria are eligible to transfer from vocational schools to universities. The credit transfer (*hennyū*) system allows students who have already completed part of their post-secondary education—whether in Japan or abroad—to transfer credits and enter a Japanese university at the second or third-year level (Study in Japan, n.d.-c). Unlike the new application process, the emphasis here is on demonstrating existing knowledge and expertise in the specific field of study that the student wishes to pursue. To qualify for transfer admission, students must have completed a vocational school program lasting at least two years with a total of 1,700 instructional hours and must also possess university entrance qualifications such as a high school diploma (MEXT, n.d.). However, the specific conditions for transfer, including the academic year in which students can enroll and the number of credits recognized, vary by university. Prospective transfer students need to consult the admissions offices of their desired universities to understand the necessary procedures and required documents.

To understand students' transitions from vocational education to university, and the institutional mechanisms that support or hinder them, the following section presents the conceptual framework guiding the analysis of this study.

## 3. Conceptual Framework: The Education-Migration Industry and the Institutional Permeability

Studying the educational mobility of international students within host countries is essential to understand the structural (in)equality embedded in higher education access. While international students are often seen as a homogeneous group, their educational trajectories vary significantly depending on institutional pathways, socio-economic background, and policy frameworks in the host country. Some studies have touched on the topic of educational mobility of international students in the host country, including the transition from language schools to vocational education in Japan (Le, 2022; Nohata, 2023), and many address vocational training as a temporary stop before higher education in the case of international students in Japan and Australia (L. Cao & Tran, 2014; Liu-Farrer, 2009; O'Shea et al., 2012). However, educational pathways from vocational schools to universities in Japan have not been extensively explored. Studies on institutional support for international students typically focus on students' life support, with a particular emphasis on mental health and well-being (Kwon, 2009; Versteeg & Kappe, 2021). This includes counselling services, peer support programs, and initiatives aimed at helping students adapt to cultural and academic challenges. However, there has been less attention given to institutional mechanisms that directly facilitate or hinder educational mobility.

By examining how international students navigate their pathway from vocational school to university, this study contributes to the literature on the education-migration industry in Asia—an industry that thrives alongside the growing mobility of students from developing Asian countries—by focusing on the practices of study-abroad agencies and their impacts on migrants' educational trajectories.

Like other forms of migration, international student mobility is produced, maintained, and promoted by actors with diverse interests participating in the process (Cranston et al., 2018). Migration scholars use the

term “education-migration industry” to refer to “education agents” and “recruiters,” who play important roles in shaping the educational trajectories of international students (Baas, 2019). Targeting Asian students, these “study-abroad agents” or international education brokers not only commercialize study-abroad information and services that connect “lower-middle class prospective migrants in Asia with educational institutions in the developed world” (Luk & Yeoh, 2024, p. 4), but also profit from the dependency of prospective students in navigating the complex migration policies of host countries (Wickramasekara & Baruah, 2017). This dependence on brokers also results from students’ lack of access to information, putting them at a disadvantage in their relationship with the brokers (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Lan, 2019). Additionally, by providing services that ensure students get into elite universities and promoting the notion of “travel-studying,” education-migration agents can trigger the desire for an international education among their prospective clients—students and their parents—which Lan (2019, p. 273) called “the consumerism in the self-funded study-abroad market.” In Asian countries, such as China, Vietnam, or Nepal, these agents with intermediary roles provide paid services to the prospective students before their departure, ranging from consultation, language training, and visa preparation to more unethical activities like falsifying student backgrounds for visa or school application purposes (Feng & Horta, 2021; Kharel, 2022; Lan, 2019; Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019; Ying & Wright, 2021). While existing research has analysed the recruitment and “packaging” processes that facilitate migrants’ entry, less attention has been paid to how brokers’ practices shape the post-departure trajectories of student-migrants. To address this gap, this study examines how such practices influence the long-term educational mobility of international students within the host country.

Next, to examine how Japanese vocational schools facilitate international students’ transition to university, this study draws on Bernhard’s (2018, 2019) concept of institutional permeability. This concept refers to the degree to which institutional barriers between educational sectors are dismantled, allowing for smoother transitions and greater educational mobility. A permeable education system supports students in navigating their pathways by offering structures that accommodate diverse learning needs and aspirations (Bernhard, 2019).

In my research, institutional permeability serves as an analytical lens to understand vocational school practices and their effectiveness in enabling upward mobility. Bernhard (2018) identified four key structural conditions that influence permeability: (a) access opportunities, i.e., whether students are eligible to advance to the next level; (b) recognition and validation of prior training; (c) institutionalized linkages between vocational schools and universities; and (d) institutional support for students’ heterogeneous needs.

Building on the fourth dimension, Bernhard (2019) also outlined four support structures necessary for institutions to effectively serve students aiming for further education: (a) information and counselling, (b) financial support, (c) learning organization and pedagogy, and (d) organizational culture. First, to increase the educational permeability of vocational students, schools need to provide them with information and counselling that motivates them to recognize their academic abilities and apply for level-appropriate programs. Second, providing financial aid opportunities along with comprehensive counselling on these options plays a crucial role in shaping enrollment decisions, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Third, structuring and adapting teaching and learning methods to align with students’ needs is essential for their academic success and readiness for higher education. Lastly, fostering an institutional culture that acknowledges student diversity and emphasizes the importance of academic guidance and orientation is a key aspect of support.

In the Japanese context, where vocational education is often positioned as an endpoint for international students rather than a bridge to higher education, the concept of institutional permeability offers a valuable lens for exploring the structural dynamics of educational mobility. In particular, the dimensions of information, counselling, and organizational culture are especially important for understanding how institutional practices influence students' ability to transition to university. These dimensions provide a preliminary framework for analysing the extent to which vocational schools support or hinder students' aspirations for further education. The following section outlines the methodological approach used to investigate the proposed research questions, focusing on the experiences of Vietnamese vocational students as they navigate the pathways between vocational education and university in Japan.

## 4. Data and Methods

This research focuses on the experiences of the Vietnamese students in Japan as the "typical case" (Gerring, 2008). As of 2023, Vietnamese students comprise the second biggest population of foreign students studying at Japanese higher education institutions (more than 22,000 students), ranking only after Chinese students (MEXT, 2024). As of March 2024, Vietnamese is the most frequent citizenship background of international students in vocational schools in Japan, with 8,547 students making up 29 percent of the total (JICE, 2024). This study is particularly relevant because it focused on the largest group of international students enrolled in vocational schools in Japan. While the findings were grounded in the experiences of this specific group, the study offers important insights into how institutional structures and support mechanisms shape educational mobility within Japan's vocational sector. By examining the opportunities and challenges of this prominent student population, the research contributes to broader discussions on the educational trajectories of non-Japanese vocational students and the systemic conditions that may similarly affect students of other nationalities.

This research uses a qualitative approach in gathering data. I conducted an exploratory study to understand the experiences of non-Japanese vocational students in Japan and their pathways to universities. I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with ten participants. The informants chosen for this research were (a) Vietnamese students who enrolled or are currently enrolling in vocational schools in Japan, who are interested in advancing to higher education or are already accepted into university, or (b) Vietnamese university students or university graduates who graduated from Japanese vocational schools. All informants were recruited through Facebook, the most popular social media platform used by Vietnamese people.

Table 1 shows the demographic information of this research's informants. The selected cases mirror the diversity of the Vietnamese students who pass through vocational schools regarding gender, age, and university enrollment method. The gender ratio of informants was balanced. Regarding their status, three of them were vocational school students, six were enrolled in universities in Japan, and only one was employed. The year of entering Japan as students also ranged from 2015 to 2022, so the perspectives of both pre- and post-Covid-19 international students were included. The method of entering higher education also varied, with six informants entering or planning to enter universities through the credit transferring (*hennyū*) process, while the other four entered universities as new students. Although I did not specify the location of university after graduation from vocational school while recruiting participants, all informants went to universities in Japan or had planned to apply to Japanese universities.

**Table 1.** Research participants information.

| Name (Pseudonym) | Sex | Age | Current status | Year of entering Japan | Method to enroll in a university |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Vy | F | 25 | University student | 2019 | Credit transfer |
| Chi | F | 28 | IT engineer | 2015 | New student |
| Thinh | M | 23 | Vocational student | 2021 | Credit transfer |
| Phuong | F | 27 | University student | 2017 | New student |
| Quy | M | 21 | Vocational student | 2022 | Credit transfer |
| Quyen | F | 21 | Vocational student | 2022 | Credit transfer |
| Hung | M | 23 | University student | 2021 | New student |
| Quang | M | 23 | University student | 2020 | Credit transfer |
| Mai | F | 23 | University student | 2020 | New student |
| Long | M | 23 | University student | 2020 | Credit transfer |

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, with each lasting between 60 minutes to 120 minutes. All informants were residing in Japan at the time of the interview. The informants could choose between in-person and online interviews. I conducted five one-to-one interviews and two group interviews at the request of my informants. Only one of the one-to-one interviews was conducted in person, in Tokyo, while all other interviews were conducted online according to informants' preference or geographical proximity. Online interviews were conducted via Zoom and only the audio recordings were saved for the purpose of this research. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Maintaining an exploratory approach, I examine the life stories of my informants through semi-structured interviews. I designed my open-ended questions around the central question: How do international students experience the transition from vocational education to universities? The research design of the study was shaped by some underlying theoretical considerations. Inspired by Bourdieu's (1986) *Theory of Capital*, each interview began with an exploration of the participant's family background, life before coming to Japan, and their motivations for studying abroad. The concept of the education-migration industry (Baas, 2019; Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019) provided a lens through which to examine the role of study-abroad agencies in structuring students' pathways, including the ways these intermediaries influence access to information and shape students' mobility. The questions then focused on their educational experiences in different educational institutions in Japan. The interviews typically concluded with a reflective question about possible alternative pathways—what the informants might have done differently in their educational journey if they had access to more information. In line with Bernhard's (2018, 2019) concept of institutional permeability, this question aimed to explore the extent to which better awareness of available options could have influenced their past decisions, shedding light on the role of information gaps in shaping their educational trajectories.

In my analysis, I started with the open coding method. After the initial coding phase, I proceeded to selective coding, where I identified recurring patterns and developed key themes for discussions, revealing institutional structures and practices. A key aspect of my analysis involved coding their decisions regarding *vocational training* or *university education* as high-level categories, identifying when and why these choices were made. Another essential thematic code is *the meaning of vocational schools*, which provides insights into

how international students perceive the role of vocational institutions in supporting their transition to universities, in order to analyse the institutional permeability of these schools. Additionally, the theme of *university preparation* complements this analysis by capturing students' experiences in navigating the transition. I developed a classification (or "typology") of vocational schools based on these recurring themes. This typology should help interpret the different ways vocational schools operate, particularly in how they assist students in transitioning to university. In addition, in order to provide a statistical description of international student trends in Japan, I referenced official statistics, including the data from MEXT for international student numbers and annual surveys conducted by JASSO and APJLE on post-graduation pathways of non-Japanese language school and vocational students. I also analysed policies and policy reports on international students from the Agency of Cultural Affairs and MEXT. To gather general information on the Japanese educational system for students, I referenced different sectors from the Study in Japan website (https://study-japan-ptc.jp/index_en.php), a government-approved information site for prospective international students seeking education in Japan.

## 5. The Japanese Education-Migration Industry and International Students' Educational Mobility

### *5.1. Marketing Japanese Educational Mobility*

My research data revealed that the students who aspired to enroll in universities were typically high school graduates who had already secured their place in universities in Vietnam but chose to pursue study opportunities overseas instead. In Vietnam's fast-developing and competitive economy, holding a domestic university degree without international exposure often limits career prospects, particularly for those without strong personal connections or networks. The pressure to secure a good job in such an environment leads many students to seek international experiences, which are increasingly valued in Vietnam's labour market. Japan is considered an ideal study destination for these students based on its proximity to Vietnam, its affordable fees, and/or based on recommendations from acquaintances. The relatively low barriers to entry into Japanese educational institutions—especially Japanese language schools—and the ease of obtaining a student visa make Japan a particularly attractive destination for students who may have been unable to secure visas for other developed countries. One of my informants, Quang, a 23-year-old male student, chose Japan as an alternative route after failing to get a visa to study in the United Kingdom. This accessibility is not incidental and is a key feature of the Japanese education-migration industry (Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019), which constructs and markets education as a migration pathway. In this way, the education-migration industry capitalizes on global inequalities in access to education and migration, positioning itself as a more attainable alternative to restrictive Global North destinations.

Seeking a university education that they could have pursued in Vietnam, in Japan, these students have high expectations and refuse to settle for less, i.e., they are unwilling to accept educational opportunities in their host country that are perceived as inferior to what they could have had at home. These students often possess significant economic capital and cultural capital—such as foreign language proficiency, university admission at home, or strong motivation for upward mobility—which means they do not require the kind of "packaging" or narrative construction typically provided by study-abroad agencies (see Luk & Yeoh, 2024). Instead, their choices are shaped by the lack of information or, more specifically, the asymmetric access to information in comparison with the agencies (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Lan, 2019). Study-abroad agencies, functioning as

key intermediaries within the education-migration industry (Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019), exploit this information gap to construct a narrative of educational mobility. Profiting from promoting the language school pathway, these agencies often fail to provide clear and comprehensive guidance on alternative routes, such as direct admission to higher education institutions. Liu-Farrer and Tran's (2019, p. 239) study indicated that consultants from study-abroad agencies provided students with "various kinds of universities and vocational schools to which they could apply." However, in my current research with data collected in 2024, language schools as an entry to Japan and transition channels to vocational education are the only sources of information provided to all my informants. Prospective students, through consultation with agency staff, perceive the transition from language schools to vocational education as an obvious norm and are not made aware of the opportunities available to them to study in universities upon arrival. These agencies construct a narrative—perhaps even an illusion—of educational mobility, attracting students to study-abroad programs in Japan by promoting the easy transition from language schools to vocational schools, which have relatively low admission requirements:

> The people from the agency injected the idea into our head. They draw an easy pathway….Even before coming to Japan, I already knew that I would advance to vocational school after graduation. You know, it is like finishing junior high school, then we go to high school. (Long, 23, male, university student)

### *5.2. Marketing Pathways From Japanese Education to the Workplace*

The education-migration industry has also profited from promoting a seemingly linear and attainable pathway for international students: language school → vocational school → employment. This narrative is particularly appealing to students from less privileged backgrounds, who see vocational education as a shortcut to entering the workforce and earning money quickly right after language school. Many Vietnamese students, often with limited financial support from their families, initially choose vocational schools as a strategy to escape the low-wage labour markets in Vietnam, where economic opportunities are limited and with little room for upward mobility (Le, 2022). For these students, Japan's labour shortage initially presents an opportunity: Even manual labour roles are relatively well-compensated.

However, after graduating, these students are often confronted with the precarious realities of the Japanese labour market for vocational graduates, including low salaries, the abundance of physically demanding jobs, limited career advancement, and job insecurity, even in positions perceived as white-collar. They recognize that vocational education can trap them in the very labour conditions they sought to escape, those that have led some to reconsider their educational trajectories in the first place. University education begins to emerge as a viable path for achieving more stable, skilled, and well-compensated employment. For these students, aspiring to enter a university becomes a conscious act of resistance against the predetermined pathway marketed to them by the education-migration industry and a reassertion of their long-term ambitions for upward mobility:

> I enrolled in a vocational school specialized in interpretation/translation and my major was [interpretation/translation] from Vietnamese to Japanese….It was first my dream to become an interpreter and a translator. Don't they sound cool, interpretation and translation? However, you can only find jobs in these fields and cannot change to a different field. Half of my friends went back to Vietnam. The salary was extremely low. After taxes, the full-time salary is barely more than what a student can earn through heavy part-time work. (Phuong, 27, female, university student)

### *5.3. Access to Japanese Universities: Choices and Challenges*

While students at vocational schools can use the credit transfer (*hennyū*) system to enroll in universities, some students choose to apply as freshmen. Each pathway comes with distinct requirements and opportunities, catering to students at different stages of their academic journey. For some, starting anew is seen as "the true form of study" and a way to fully experience university life (Phuong), while for others, it reflects a lack of awareness about the *hennyū* system altogether (Chi). Living in Japan allows students to bypass the firewall of information controlled by study-abroad agencies, giving them access to broader and more detailed knowledge about the higher education pathways available.

This information gap is not coincidental but reflects the structural logic of the education-migration industry, in which study-abroad agencies, language schools, and vocational schools construct a streamlined package for profit. Since university education is not included in this "standard package," students are seldom informed about alternative routes like *hennyū* until they begin the process of navigating higher education themselves. My informants uniformly reported that they had not heard of the credit transfer system until they were already preparing their university applications. This lack of information also reflects a broader institutional failure to recognize that access to accurate and timely information is a critical dimension of educational permeability.

Between the two options to obtain a university education, the credit transfer pathway is significantly more popular among informants who have attempted to take the university entrance exam from a language school but failed to do so. Quy and Quyen, both 21, recalled how they concealed their plans to apply to university from their language school, knowing it prioritized pushing students toward partnered vocational schools—institutions Quyen described as being at the "bottom of the ranking [system]." After their failed entrance attempts, they enrolled in a vocational school affiliated with their preferred university, hoping to transfer there later via *hennyū*. Starting from scratch as new students felt like a waste of their time and the resources they had already invested. Similarly, Thinh, 23, who had also failed to enter university directly, saw the *hennyū* system as a more efficient pathway. For Quang and Long, the possibility of condensing their post-secondary education into four years rather than six made the credit transfer route especially appealing.

Still, this pathway is far from accessible. While *hennyū* does not require EJU scores, it does demand language proficiency (typically JLPT N2 or higher), a GPA of at least 3.0 out of 4.0 in a vocational school, and a field of study at the vocational school that aligns closely with the student's desired major at the university. This requirement reflects a form of organizational linkage—a key component of institutional permeability—designed to ensure that students are academically prepared to enter university in their third year, where peers have already developed subject-specific expertise. Currently, these linkages exist outside the framework of the education-migration industry.

Perhaps most importantly, in the process of credit transfer, students must obtain a nomination letter from their vocational school—a document that only a few students receive each year. Quang and Long were two of just five students selected for nomination, thanks to both strong academic records and active extracurricular involvement. In this context, the nomination letter acts as a form of institutional endorsement, signalling the vocational school's confidence in a student's academic readiness and aligning with the receiving university's expectations. While Bernhard's (2019) concept of institutional linkage refers to formal arrangements between vocational schools and universities to facilitate transitions, this practice

indicates that organizational linkage is not only structural but also evokes relational trust-based practices between institutions. Universities treat these students as a form of liability, as their academic performance may influence the future availability of credit transfer "slots" allocated to their vocational school. A poor performance by transferred students could damage the trust between institutions, leading universities to reduce or reconsider future credit transfer admissions from that school. Therefore, the selective nomination system can also limit permeability by introducing subjective or discretionary elements into an already competitive and complicated process. In the end, students' access to the *hennyū* system is largely merit-based, requiring them to demonstrate their deservedness through high levels of motivation and academic performance. This system reinforces the idea that only the most dedicated and academically capable students can transition from vocational education to university, further shaping the narrative of educational mobility as an individual achievement rather than a structural opportunity, at least in the case of international students.

To sum up, this section has explored the role of study-abroad agencies in shaping Vietnamese students' educational trajectories and the challenges in accessing universities. The next section examines the different types of vocational schools and their roles in facilitating university transitions, highlighting both their supportive functions and the limitations that may hinder students' academic progression.

## 6. Typologies of Vocational Schools and the Dimensions of Institutional Permeability

Drawing from interview data, this section identifies three distinct types of vocational schools in Japan, based on their varied practices in supporting international students' transitions to university: (a) vocation-oriented, (b) further education (*shingaku*)-oriented, and (c) a hybrid form of both. Using Bernhard's (2019) concept of institutional permeability, these school types are analysed through their provision (or absence) of (a) access opportunities, (b) recognition of prior learning, (c) institutionalized linkages, and (d) support for heterogeneous student needs.

### *6.1. Typical Vocational Training Schools*

These vocational schools focus primarily on providing practical, job-oriented skills to help students transition directly into the labour market—typical vocational schools, as per the definition of the MEXT. They offer programs in fields such as business administration, translation, hospitality, and other specialized areas that cater to students' needs for job hunting upon graduation. For many international students, these schools are attractive because they provide short and direct pathways to the Japanese labour market, compared to four years of university (Le, 2022). They also have relatively low admission requirements. With decreasing Japanese student populations, these schools aggressively advertise themselves to language school graduates by evolving into international student-oriented vocational schools (*ryūgakusei-muke senmongakko*; see Le, 2022). Popular among international students for their relatively low admission requirements and clear employment pathways, they align closely with the goals of the education-migration industry, providing students with visa sponsorship and job-ready credentials.

Access to higher education in these institutions is structurally limited. Vocation-specialized schools often highlight their high job placement rates as a key marketing strategy to attract students. This emphasis influences the behaviour of teachers, who are pressured to maintain strong job placement statistics,

resulting in a preference for students who engage in job-hunting activities over those aspiring to higher education. Students interested in pursuing further education frequently report receiving inadequate information and support, as many teachers lack sufficient knowledge about higher education pathways for international students. Additionally, unequal treatment between students seeking employment and those pursuing higher education creates further obstacles. For example, students who take days off to attend job-hunting activities can do so freely if proof is provided, whereas those attending open campus events or academic entrance exams often face attendance penalties that may impact their future visa renewals. This imbalance in support leads to feelings of isolation and exclusion for students focused on academic advancement, such as Thinh, who felt out of place and unsupported among job-seeking peers. Another informant, Phuong, shared her feelings of betrayal, having been initially promised support for further education by the school, only to be later discouraged from taking entrance exams—a discouragement suspected to stem from concerns that failed attempts would negatively reflect on teachers' performance evaluations and, potentially, their earnings:

> The teachers did not recommend advancing to university. They promised to support me when I applied, but then discouraged me from doing so….One teacher takes care of one class. If the students pass their entrance exam to university, [there is] no problem. But if they fail, the performance of the class [is] affected. My teacher introduced me to some universities…but they are extremely low-ranking ones, like, everyone can be accepted there. There is no value in joining a school like that.

In summary, vocation-oriented schools largely fail to meet the prerequisites of institutional permeability. While they offer accessible entryways into education and legal residence in Japan, they provide limited access to a university education. These institutions have little reason or obligations to guide students through the university application process, leaving many without access to essential information or academic consultation. Instead, the institutional focus remains on employment outcomes, fostering an organizational culture where aspirations for further education are often discouraged. As such, these schools function as barriers to education permeability, reinforcing a rigid vocational education-to-labour pipeline that marginalizes students with academic aspirations.

### *6.2. Hybrid Vocational Schools*

The second type of vocational school in Japan is a hybrid type, balancing vocational training with university-preparatory opportunities. Besides providing industry-oriented skills, such institutions offer *shingaku* (further education) courses that support students preparing for university entrance. For students interested in pursuing further education, these schools act as a bridge, facilitating a smoother transition through credit transfer, particularly to the affiliated university. Students benefit from targeted academic support, such as EJU preparation, guidance on entrance exams, and counselling on academic pathways. This dual focus allows students to keep their options open, balancing the pursuit of immediate vocational opportunities with longer-term educational goals. These schools serve as key "permeability bridges" (Dörffer & Bernhard, 2025), supporting students with heterogeneous needs.

Although the post-graduation pathways differ among students, hybrid vocational schools make efforts to prepare students for further education through their learning organization and pedagogy. For instance, in Quy and Quyen's school, once they expressed to their teacher their aspirations to advance to university,

they were placed in a *shingaku*-specialized program designed to support their goals. A typical school day was intensive, starting at 9 AM and ending at 7 PM. During the morning and afternoon sessions, students took major-specific courses tailored to their fields of study. In Quyen's case, as an international aviation major, all morning classes were conducted in English, with afternoon sessions focusing more deeply on her specialized subject. Evenings were reserved for Japanese language education, where students develop essential skills such as essay writing to meet the requirements for credit transfer. While the workload can be demanding, students like Mai find value in the rigor of these programs; for example, the repetitive schedule of morning-to-late-night classes helped her develop discipline and diligence as a student, which increased her readiness mentally and academically for future university education. Similarly, in Quang and Long's school, students benefit from the presence of *shingaku*-class-appointed teachers who provide focused guidance. These teachers can help students improve their academic abilities and Japanese proficiency, ensuring they are well-prepared for the challenging transition to further education.

These institutions actively facilitate students' transition to universities by integrating multiple support mechanisms. They offer comprehensive information and counselling services, ensuring that students are well-informed about their academic options. Additionally, they provide specialized courses designed to prepare students for higher education, along with strong teacher support to guide them through the process.

A key characteristic of hybrid vocational schools is their institutional affiliations. Many are directly affiliated with universities, while others establish formal partnerships with local universities, enabling their students to transition smoothly through recommendation-based admissions rather than standardized entrance exams and catering to students who aspire to further their education through the *hennyū* (credit transfer) system. Because these schools benefit from their students' academic progression, they foster an organizational culture that prioritizes further education, actively encouraging students to continue their studies beyond vocational training.

In summary, hybrid vocational schools exhibit moderate to high institutional permeability by balancing vocational training with structured further education support. They offer access opportunities and maintain institutional linkages with universities. Support for students' diverse needs is present in the form of information and counseling, adapted pedagogy, and a supportive organizational culture. While these schools foster academic aspiration, access to resources like nomination letters and *shingaku* programs can be selective, making permeability conditional rather than guaranteed. Still, they represent a meaningful step toward more inclusive educational mobility for international students.

### *6.3. Purely* Shingaku*-Oriented Schools With Specialization in Further Education*

The last type of vocational school is the purely *shingaku*-oriented school. Among my informants, three students—Chi, Thinh, and Hung—studied at such university-prep schools. These schools offer university-preparatory courses that operate under vocational school status but primarily serve students aspiring to enter further education. These vocational schools in Japan operate as de facto *bekka* (university-preparatory) programs, despite not being officially classified as such under Japanese law. According to Article 91 of the School Education Act of 1947, only universities are legally permitted to establish *bekka* programs (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2023). However, these institutions circumvent this regulation by adopting the status of vocational schools, likely because it is administratively easier to

establish a private vocational school compared to a university. This status also allows them to provide students with the necessary legal status to stay in Japan as regular students.

To comply with government regulations, these schools still implement a formal credit-based curriculum, requiring students to take courses other than university-prep courses in order to graduate. However, based on my informants' experiences, these courses are often perceived as superficial and primarily exist to fulfill legal educational requirements. My informants described them as unchallenging, with lenient grading and minimal academic rigor. The primary focus of these institutions remains university preparation, rather than vocational training, making them functionally equivalent to *bekka* programs despite their official designation as vocational schools. Students attending these schools typically do not have job prospects after graduation because purely *shingaku*-oriented vocational schools do not offer a substantive major field of study. As a result, their graduates are not granted the status of "specialist" required by immigration policies to secure an employment visa in Japan.

*Shingaku*-oriented schools are highly competitive and specialize in offering extensive courses designed to prepare students for Japanese university entrance exams, using their intense pedagogy as a way to create an intensive organizational culture. Their programs focus on EJU preparation, demanding Japanese language training, and other subjects necessary for admissions. For the students, the rigorous academic environment and focused preparation through consultation and intensive curricula represent a clear pathway to achieving their educational aspirations. Hung, one of my informants, initially aimed to enter Waseda University but later failed the entrance exam and secured admission to his second choice, Chuo University—both prestigious higher education institutes in Tokyo. Hung reflected on the role of vocational education in his journey to a top-tier university:

> My first choice was Waseda University. If I had chosen Chuo University from the beginning, I could have passed the exam already [following graduation from a language school]. The reason I enrolled in a university prep course was so that I could pass the entrance exam to Waseda University. I know that the name of the school will greatly influence the job-hunting process. (Hung, 23, male, university student)

Whereas the *shingaku*-oriented schools fulfil many criteria of institutional permeability, such as highly designed pedagogy and consultation, their rigorous entry eligibility requirements present institutional barriers, which many students struggle to meet. Thinh said that he had to submit his intermediate N2 Japanese proficiency just to apply for his university-prep vocational school, which is sufficient for the admission process in many universities. This was still relatively easy compared to Hung's entrance exam to his prestigious *shingaku* school, which comprised a Japanese test (upper intermediate to advanced level), an essay on globalization, an EJU-like exam to test their knowledge on society or economics, a math test, and finally an interview with the school officials. Despite these challenges, this type of school is particularly attractive to ambitious students like Hung, who aim to secure admission into higher-ranking universities.

The rigorous admission and intensive curriculum create a strongly academic organizational culture for *shingaku*-oriented schools; however, it is occasionally exclusionary. Hung's school offered specialized courses designed specifically to prepare students for admission to Waseda and Keio Universities—the two top private universities in Japan—but these courses were exclusively taught by Chinese teachers and only accessible to Chinese students. Hung recalled feeling frustrated: "I could afford those classes, but no one

was teaching. I felt powerless, it was something out of my control." The limited pathways from vocational education to universities for Vietnamese students in Japan can be attributed to a combination of low student demand and the resulting scarcity of educational opportunities designed to facilitate this transition. Hung's story reveals the double-edged nature of these schools: While they are academically rigorous and goal-oriented, they operate under market forces and ethnolinguistic segmentation, limiting equity within even high-permeability spaces.

In summary, *shingaku*-oriented schools exhibit high academic permeability in practice, though they are constrained by institutional ambiguity. They provide intensive preparation for university admissions, thus ensuring strong learning and pedagogical practices, as well as tailored information and counselling for students with academic goals. However, access opportunities remain limited by high entry barriers and the absence of formal articulation agreements. These schools operate outside established institutional linkages, relying instead on students' ability to succeed through standardized exams. While the organizational culture is supportive of higher education, barriers emerge through informal segregation, as seen in ethnolinguistic inequalities in access to elite preparation courses.

## 7. Conclusion and Limitations

This study explored how Vietnamese international students in Japan navigate the transition from vocational education to university, and how Japanese vocational schools facilitate—or fail to facilitate—this process. Guided by the dual frameworks of institutional permeability (Bernhard, 2018, 2019) and the education-migration industry (Baas, 2019; Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019), the research addressed two central questions: How students experience this transition and how institutional structures shape their pathways.

The findings show that students' educational mobility is shaped by structural constraints and informational inequalities embedded within the education-migration industry. Study-abroad agencies promote a dominant narrative that presents the language school—vocational school—employment trajectory as the standardized route, capitalizing on the demand for attainable overseas education. While this pathway appears to promise educational mobility, it often limits students' access to universities by obscuring alternative routes and reinforcing a commodified, labour-oriented model of international education.

Meanwhile, institutional permeability is unevenly distributed across different types of vocational schools and is actively structured through organizational practices. Standard vocation-oriented schools primarily focus on career preparation, providing industry-specific skills with little emphasis on university pathways. These institutions often lack the incentives or resources to guide students toward further education, leaving them to navigate the process independently. On the other hand, hybrid vocational schools with strong formal and relational organizational linkages serve as key but conditional permeability bridges. Additionally, some vocational schools strictly focus on further education, acting as de facto university-prep schools instead of vocational training. These schools enable academic advancement, but only for those who already meet high academic thresholds. Bernhard's (2018, 2019) framework enables us to see that educational mobility for international students is not a neutral process, but one mediated by variable levels of information and institutional cooperation. Permeability is not simply present or absent—it is negotiated, stratified, and often contingent upon students' academic performance and persistence within implicit institutional logics of functionality.

By combining these two conceptual lenses, the study shows how permeability is not simply a technical or administrative matter, but a product of the education-migration industry, commercial interests, and institutional cultures. It highlights the stratified nature of international student mobility in Japan and the need for more transparent and equitable access to academic progression routes. In this context, future research should continue to explore the educational trajectories of international students, particularly those from developing economies, to further understand the factors that enable them to break through the barriers and successfully transition from vocational training to university education. This would not only contribute to a deeper understanding of educational mobility but also inform policies and practices that could help facilitate similar pathways for other international students in Japan and beyond.

This research has several limitations. This research was initially designed to explore individual perceptions of opportunities, which led to limited discussion on institutional structures and practices. Future research should incorporate interviews with school administrators and teachers to deepen understanding of institutional logics of functionality. Second, the relatively small sample size and number of vocational schools represented may limit generalizability. A larger number of informants could reveal that the variations between these school types indeed reflect institutional differences rather than idiosyncratic differences between individual vocational school organizations. Finally, the study focuses exclusively on Vietnamese students, whose cultural and socio-economic contexts may not represent all international students in Japan. Future studies that include a wider range of nationalities would help validate these findings and extend their relevance. Nonetheless, Bernhard's (2018, 2019) concept of institutional permeability remains a valuable framework for analysing educational mobility and guiding policy responses aimed at fostering more inclusive international student pathways.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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