

Indonesian students' motivation to pursue tertiary education in Japan

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Article History

Submitted date:
2023-04-29
Accepted date:
2023-05-20
Published date:
2023-05-31

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the motivations of Indonesian students to pursue tertiary education in Japan. Investigating the experiences and perspectives of five Indonesian students, collected through in-dept interview, pursuing a degree program in Japan, this study argued that academic factors alone proved insufficient in capturing a comprehensive picture of students' motivation. The findings revealed that while academic motivation remained as an important driving force, socio-cultural factors contributed heavily to maintaining the students' interest towards Japan. Interestingly, the findings also revealed that the students' consideration to continue study in Japan was heavily influenced by routine and seemingly mundane matters namely, day-to-day living experience, such as the tolerance exhibited by Japanese society towards religious practices, the geographical proximity, and safety concerns, rather than being primarily driven by academic ambitions. Thus, to gain comprehensive students' motivations in pursuing higher education abroad, it is necessary to contextualize it within a broader socio-cultural background.

Keywords:

international student;
motivation; Japan; socio-
culture

Abstrak

Kata Kunci:

pelajar internasional;
motivasi; Jepang; sosial-
budaya

Motivasi pelajar Indonesia untuk melanjutkan pendidikan tinggi di Jepang

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui motivasi pelajar Indonesia dalam menempuh pendidikan tinggi di Jepang. Dengan menggunakan sumber data berupa pengalaman dan perspektif dari 5 orang pelajar Indonesia di Jepang, temuan dari artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa hanya memfokuskan pada aspek akademis saja, kurang mampu memberi pemahaman yang komprehensif terkait motivasi pelajar Indonesia. Selain itu, faktor sosial budaya menjadi berkontribusi besar dalam pemilihan Jepang sebagai negara tujuan studi lanjut. Temuan dalam artikel ini juga menunjukkan bahwa pertimbangan pelajar untuk melanjutkan studi di Jepang dipengaruhi oleh hal-hal yang bersifat rutin seperti seperti pengalaman positif dalam menjalani kehidupan sehari-hari, termasuk kemudahan dalam beribadah, kedekatan geografis antara Jepang dan Indonesia, serta kondisi keamanan di Jepang. Oleh karena itu dalam menganalisis motivasi pelajar Indonesia untuk studi lanjut ke luar negeri perlu dilihat konteks sosial budaya yang melatar belakangnya.

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1 Introduction

The number of students who studied abroad reached 4,3 million in 2011 which tripled from 1,3 million in 1990 (OECD, 2013). More than half of the students who pursue higher education outside of their home country are Asian students, placing Asia the largest source of international students in the world (OECD, 2013). As this paper is primarily concerned with international student mobility or ISM in higher education, this paper follows Richters and Tachler (2006), who defined ISM as “crossing country borders for the purpose of or in the context of tertiary education” (p. 79). ISM provides a window to look at the interconnected world of the education system. For an individual student, studying abroad has been seen as a ‘rite of passage’ for young scholars who aim to improve their knowledge and life experience. Indeed, given the importance and the ever-rising number of students who chose to study abroad, international student mobility drew the interest of both scholars and policymakers alike. In recent years, various studies have been dedicated to the topic of international student mobility (Wells, 2014). However, the majority of the existing studies aim to explore the movement of Asian students towards Western universities while neglecting the mobility within Asian countries. This prompted some scholars to call for more attention to the study of student mobility in intra-Asian regions (Collins et al., 2017)

Answering such a call, this paper taps into this underexplored area of research by bringing the case of Indonesian students in Japan. Japan has been ranked as one of the top 5 destinations for Indonesian students since the 1980s.

Despite this trend, little attention has been given to Japan. The existing literature on international students' motivation in Japan was primarily divided into two main strands. First, those who focus on the motivation of the Japanese language learners, which revolves around the students' attempt to advance their language proficiency (Djafri & Wahidati, 2020; Lv et al., 2017). Second, those who investigate the motivation of the students within the context of international education as a channel towards labor migration (Efendi et al., 2021; He et al., 2016; Liu-Farrer, 2009) While language skills and labor migration remain important in the discussion of international student mobility, the existing literature neglected the scholarly aspects of Japan.

Japan presents an interesting case as the country began to actively strengthen its engagement toward international education in the 1980s, providing a rich context for understanding the Japanese desire to engage in international higher education. Combined with the Japanese economic boom during this time, the interest in studying Japanology spawned worldwide, placing Japan as a forefront higher education destination in Asia (Hashimoto, 2000; Ninomiya et al., 2009; Sanders, 2019). Indeed, in recent years, the number of Indonesian students studying in Japan has continued to grow (JASSO, n.d., 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021). However, for Indonesian students who want to study abroad there are plenty of options in regard of the country destinations, namely, Singapore and Australia which had been extremely successful in attracting international students (Sanders, 2019; Shinn et al., 1999). Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to see how degree students perceive Japan as a host country, against this highly competitive backdrop of international education.

In doing so, this paper looks at the motivation of Indonesian students to pursue and continue their tertiary education in Japan. This paper is concerned with (i) the motivation to pursue higher education in Japan, (ii) the motivation to continue their study in Japan after the completion of a master's and/or bachelor's degree. It aims to provide a snapshot of what has driven the decision to

move to Japan for their tertiary education and how their perspective and experience shape their future aspiration or life trajectory after the completion of the study.

While academic factors are the cornerstone of ISM, this paper looks beyond such factor to provide a more comprehensive understanding. To get a clear picture of students' motivation, this research drew the analysis from academic and socio-cultural factors (Zhou, 2015). In this paper, academic motivation refers to the factor related to educational advancement including the reputation of the host country's higher education institutions, university rankings, the availability of laboratories facility, and the availability of expert supervisors within their respective fields. In comparison, sociocultural motivations refer to the non-academic factor, such as geographical proximity and the availability of social networks. Subsequently, this paper seeks to understand the interplay among these factors and ascertain whether motivations and aspirations change over time during their course of study.

This paper examines the dynamics of Japanese international student policies, primarily focusing on two major sets of policies, the so-called 100,000 Foreign Students Plan in 1983 followed by the 300,000 Foreign Students Plan in 2008. Significant attention is given to the sociocultural determinants that led to the change of the Japanese higher education policy. Against such a backdrop, this article explores the motivation of Indonesian students in choosing Japan as their host country. Here, this article presents a snapshot on how students' motivation is better understood as a diachronic process that is shaped by their academic goals, experiences, as well as sociocultural imperatives.

2 Methods

Methodologically, this research employed a narrative inquiry that focuses on using the stories directly told by the people who live through the experiences as data (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). In this this research, the method was used to leverage the experiences of Indonesian students studying in Japan, thereby establishing an empirical context for the exploration of their motivational factors, (before the study), life experiences (during the study), and life trajectories or aspirations (after the study). This article sought to contextualize how the student's interpretation might change after experiencing the Japanese educational system which partly shaped socio-cultural imperatives. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with five Indonesian students who pursued tertiary education in Japan. In addition to the oral narrative, one participant gave his consent to use his website, which provides key episodes of his Japanese scholarship journey to serve as a written narrative.

The participants consisted of three males and two females, with ages ranging from 20 to 40 years old. Four of them, at the time of the interview, were pursuing a bachelor's degree (Ardi), a master's degree (Novan, Akmal), and a doctoral program (Maya) in Japanese universities, whereas one participant (Esti) graduated from a master's program in Japan and had returned to Indonesia in 2018. All of the participants went to public universities, University of Tsukuba (Esti and Novan), Tohoku University (Alan), and Tokyo University for Foreign Studies (Ardi) and received scholarship funding throughout their studies from the Japanese government, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (Monbukagakusho/MEXT), except Maya who received funding from a private organization for her master degree in Osaka University and Tohoku University's scholarship for her doctoral studies.

Consequently, the participants who were funded by the MEXT scholarship, underwent a research student program lasting between six months and a year prior to commencing their

respective degree programs. During the research student program (*kenkyuusei*) the students are obliged to attend Japanese language preparation classes. The only participant who did not attend the research student program was Maya, who immediately started her master's program.

Tabel 1: Participants' demographic information

No.	Name (pseudonym)	Participant's data					Affiliated university, degree, and major
		sex	age	Year coming to Japan	Province of Origin		
1	Esti	F	41	2015	Bali	University of Tsukuba, master, social sciences	
2	Ardi	M	21	2019	Riau	Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, bachelor, social sciences	
3	Novan	M	25	2019	D.I Yogyakarta	University of Tsukuba, master, social sciences	
4	Alan	M	25	2021	East Java	University of Tohoku, master, natural sciences	
5	Maya	F	25	2019	West Java	Osaka University (master), Tohoku University (doctoral), natural sciences	

The data analysis followed a two-step process. Firstly, to contextualize the students' choice of destination and their life experiences, the changing education landscape in Asia from 1980 to 2020 was explored, followed by the investigation of the dynamics of higher education policy in Japan. At this level, this paper also sought to understand the Japanese government's perspective and political as well as economic imperatives that led to the policy change in higher education. Secondly, the analysis tapped into (1) the motivation of the students in choosing Japan as a host country for their educational pursuit, and (2) how their aspiration or life trajectory was shaped by their experiences and perspectives during their study in Japan.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Indonesians Students in Japan and the Internationalization of Japanese Education Policy, 1980-2020: An Overview

In 1970s, Japan ranked at third place as the world largest economy in the world. Despite this economic success, Japan was criticized, mainly by the United States, for the lack of contribution to human capital development in the international arena. Indeed, unlike the United States and Western European countries that had established themselves as a destination for study, Japan remained periphery in the knowledge arena. Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, during his visit abroad, received a complaint from a former international student who studied in Japan about his

displeasure towards Japanese education in general (Ota, 2003). This event is known as the primary push behind the internationalization of Japanese higher education.

In 1983, the Japanese government launched a set of policies known as the 100,000 Foreign Student Plan with the primary goal of attracting overseas students. The government established a system to facilitate this internationalization of Japanese higher education, including augmenting financial resource, setting up international programs, and consolidating Japanese language courses (Ota, 2003). The plan was largely considered as successful in increasing the number of foreign students in Japan. The number of international students went from 10,000 students in the early 1980s to more than 60,000 by the end of the 2000s (Horie 2002). The plan eventually hit the target of 100,000 students by 2007, with Chinese and Korean students contributed heavily to the percentage.

Despite the success, the 100,000 student plans failed to attract wider audiences as the international students who came to Japan were dominated by Asian students. While this downside was acknowledged by the Japanese government, the government launched a more ambitious policy, called the 300,000 Students Plan in 2007. This plan was expected to expand the number of foreign students to 300,000 by 2020. Unlike its predecessor, however, the Japanese government aimed to attract privately funded international students.

The backbone of this policy is the so-called Global 30 project. At the heart of the Global 30 Project, 30 selected universities, 27 public universities, and 3 private universities offered international programs taught in English. Global 30 aimed to attract international students without having them study the Japanese language. By passing Japanese language course, which typically take years to master, the project allowed the students to shorten their studies and attracted students outside East Asia.

Japan was one of the top choices of host countries for Indonesian students, securing a position merely trailing Australia, Malaysia, and the United States (Sarnita, 2022). In the early 1960s, around 3000 Indonesia students pursued a tertiary education in Japan (Okumura, 2019). This number swelled to around 6000 in 2020, which placed Indonesia as the fifth largest contributors of Japanese international students' share (JASSO, 2021). Indeed, the rising number of Indonesian students in Japan has consistently followed the global trend. Given the importance of Japan, this following section explores the motivations of Indonesian students in choosing Japan as their destination of study.

3.2 Explaining Students' Motivation: Beyond Academic Motivation

What motivates Indonesian students to pursue higher education in Japan? This section reveals (i) Japanese academic reputation (ii) intrinsic interest in Japan, and (iii) positive daily experience during study in Japan.

3.2.1 Academic Reputation of the Japanese Universities

During interview, all participants mentioned that the Japanese academic quality and reputation was the primary driver for their decision to study in Japan. Some of the participants based their decision on the university ranking and the availability of supervisors in their research interest, while others were primarily concerned with the quality of the Japanese language course offered by the university. Likewise, the availability of scholarships remains crucial in the participant's decision to move to Japan. The participants admitted that during their scholarship search, they narrowed their

choice down to only Japan instead of applying to various scholarships in different countries. It reveals that their interest in Japan guided them in the attempt to secure funding.

Moreover, the consideration of choosing a university based on its academic reputation ties to the students' future aspirations and interest in their selected research. Novan, a participant from Yogyakarta who was in his first year studying international politics, wanted to become a lecturer, preferably at his alma mater, one of Indonesia's renowned universities. Maya, similarly, driven by her passion for her major, shared comparable aspirations. However, despite also attending a prestigious Indonesian university for her undergraduate studies, Maya did not explicitly express her intention to return to her alma mater. Maya saw value in teaching at a smaller university, viewing it as an opportunity for mutual growth. This finding reveals the decision to pursue a doctoral program was mainly led by their choice of future career.

Likewise, for Maya and Novan, the availability of a degree program taught in English contributed to the decision to move to Japan. Unlike the other participants, Novan and Maya had a limited command of Japanese language. The expansion of degree programs taught in English is a direct result of the Japanese government's effort to attract talent (Ota, 2003).

3.2.2 Intrinsic interest in Japan

Several studies emphasized awareness as one of the key drivers which may precede where students will go for their studies (Aleles, 2015; Baker, 2016; Djafri & Wahidati, 2020; Toyoshima, 2013). Indeed, all participants in this research have been exposed to Japan from a young age. Direct exposure is the experience of interacting directly with Japanese people or having lived in Japan whereas indirect interaction, can be formed through indirect interactions, mainly through popular media such as anime and manga. This experience and exposure build an intrinsic interest in Japan. Likewise, they have some sort of awareness of how their life may look like in Japan, as they consumed Japanese cultural products, primarily manga, and anime, that were particularly popular, during their childhood in the 1990s and the early 2000s. This exposure allowed the participants to familiarize themselves with Japanese life, how the Japanese school may look alike, the transportation system, and so on. This familiarity persisted into adulthood and influenced how the participants ultimately chose where they should study.

Four out of five participants in this study, have been familiar with Japan through Japanese media. For example, Ardi, the only respondent in this research who were studying for an undergraduate degree in Japan, had fallen for Japan since childhood. This led to his decision to study the Japanese language in Junior High. Ardi was so committed to his Japanese study that he even made the decision to change his major upon completing his studies at a vocational school. Similarly, two other respondents, Novan and Alan, also claimed to know Japan from the media. However, their interest in Japan deepened when they got the opportunity to participate in a six-month student exchange program in the country. Determined to continue their master's degree in Japan, Novan and Alan seized the exchange opportunity to build a network and find a potential supervisor. Their familiarity with Japan initially sprouted from a cultural intrigue sparked by their interest in Japanese popular culture, which later solidified through firsthand experiences during their time residing in the country.

Esti, a participant from Bali is an example of how direct interaction from an early age influences interest in Japan. When she was in elementary school, Esti, a dancer, had the opportunity to go to Japan for a cultural exchange program. The cultural exchange experience served as Esti's initial gateway to engage with Japan and acted as the catalyst for her burgeoning interest in the country. Driven by an inherent fascination with Japan, she chose to pursue a major in Japanese Literature

during her undergraduate studies, thereby intensifying her motivation to pursue a master's degree in Japan.

3.2.3 Positive Daily Experience in Japan

All participants have expressed their desire to continue their study to doctoral program in Japan, with one participant already on her first year of PhD, and two actively working towards it. Interestingly, the motivation to pursue a doctorate in Japan is primarily rooted in the positive day-to-day experiences rather than solely driven by academic factors. Positive daily experiences primarily manifest in Japan into the social tolerance towards religious practices, safety, and geographical proximity. For some participants, Japanese accommodation of their religious practice was the primary reason such as the availability of halal food as well as the convenience to worship in public places as they please, as mentioned by Alan:

"In Japan, I don't experience racism, I find it easy to do a prayer. No one cares if I pray at the public park."

Apart from the religious tolerance, the students also prioritized safety as a paramount concern. As mentioned by Novan, before he studied in Japan, he had lived in Russia to learn Russian language. The initial plan was to proceed to the degree program following the completion of the language training. However, Novan opted to deviate from this plan, partly due to safety concerns. For Novan, this experience was vastly different from his stay in Japan. While comparing the two experiences, Novan said:

"I feel that Japan is safe, very different from before when I studied in Russia. Even my Papuan friend became a victim of crime there [in Russia], because he was mistakenly identified as an African. It is safe in Japan."

Another factor that contributing to positive daily experience was geographical proximity and the availability of Indonesian social network in Japan. For Maya, who cherished returning to Indonesia during summers, geographical proximity was the key in determining her choice of study destination. Moreover, the availability of social network, namely, *Perkumpulan Pelajar Indonesia*, provided an emotional support that led to a positive living experience in Japan.

"There are many Indonesians here, even I feel it's no different from studying in Bandung."

Likewise, the positive experience was the main motivation for the respondents in determining the direction of their goals after graduating from universities in Japan. Positive daily experiences as well as familiarity towards Japanese system provided greater emotional and social benefits for the students, thereby influencing their future planning. When the respondents were asked whether they would remain in Japan after the completion of bachelor master program, three participants answered yes. Ardi's answer represents how his familiarity with Japan underlies his decision.

"Maybe, because I have been working [part-time] in Japan for quite a while, I used to it, in my mind, I know more about working in Japan. In fact, I'm worried because I don't know the working system in Indonesia."

Similarly, Esti who, when the interview was conducted, had already graduated with a master's degree from Japan and was currently working in Indonesia would like to continue her doctoral program sometime in the future. While she was excited about the possibility of pursuing Ph.D. in a different country, she refused to rule out Japan. She acknowledged Japan provides lesser emotional and social risk, as she was familiar with the system. On her thought of continuing Ph.D. overseas, Esti said:

"I'm struggling to decide anyway. On the one hand, I already feel comfortable with Japan, I can speak the language too. But I also want to try elsewhere."

3.3 Understanding Students' Motivation as Diachronic Process

Important finding of this study reveals that socio-cultural factors contribute heavily to the student decision in choosing Japan as a study destination. This argument reinforces similar findings to previous studies that ties a connection between motivation to study abroad and comfort zone (Hartwell & Ounoughi, 2019; Prazeres, 2017). The desire to challenging one's comfort zone can be a powerful force for student to leave their home countries in seeking knowledge and experience. In this context, Japan represents something different and new, but still has some levels of familiarity to the students which reduces the stress of being away from home. Surprisingly, while the availability of funding remains crucial, it was not the primary motivation for the students. While applying for scholarship, the participants focused on the funding from Japan, rather widening option that includes other countries. It reveals that intrinsic interest in Japan was a crucial factor in determining destination country.

Another important finding showed the desire to remain in Japan after the completion of master's degree was driven mostly by socio cultural factors, instead of academic factors. Socio cultural factors, namely, religious tolerance, safety reasons, geographical proximity, and the availability of social network, led to positive daily experiences. The finding agreed with the existing research with credited emotional and social factors as motivation to choose a study's destination (Zhou, 2015). In this context, it unveils that the motivation to pursue a doctoral program in Japan is primarily propelled by the profound emotional and social risks associated with moving to and living in a different country.

Furthermore, motivation appears to be susceptible to change as it is shaped and reshaped by the student's life experience. Positive living experiences as revealed by the participants in this study, served a significant motivating factor for them to maintain connections with Japan after completing their studies. In addition, the motivation to study in Japan can be understood as a diachronic process, that originates in childhood and is often driven by intrinsic interest in Japanese culture, which continues to adulthood. This continuing interest in Japan, thus motivates students to maintain their ties toward Japan, as these ties are shaped and reinforced by positive experiences encountered during their stay in Japan.

4 Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to explore students' motivation in pursuing tertiary education abroad. This paper focused on Indonesian students who choose Japan as their host country for their study. As revealed from the result of the study, students' motivation to choose Japan to study are not confined to academic factors. This paper offers a complementary narrative by understanding students' motivations from socio-cultural context. Moreover, motivations is better understood as a lifelong process which subject to change. As narrated from the results, the students' motivation to pursue tertiary education in Japan began at the early age, fueled primarily by their consumption of Japanese cultural products, or direct interaction with Japanese culture. Once the students experienced study in Japan, the interest towards Japan was not diminished. Instead, it was reinforced by the positive daily experiences during their study, which, in turn, translated into motivation to maintain their connection with Japan. In other words, this finding highlights the importance of socio-cultural factors. This finding shows that routine and seemingly

mundane matters such as day to day living experiences, could be the determining factors in motivating someone to continue the study abroad.

While the literature on ISM has been steadily growing, questions persist. Thus, this section also offers an agenda for the further research. Study on ISM will be greatly benefited from longer period of analysis. For example, it has been suspected that the motivation of Indonesians students who studied in Japan during 1980s will be vastly different from those of younger generation. While the interest towards academic life might be similar, socio-economic, and cultural factors that might drive students' motivation need to be taken into consideration, given the vast changes that have occurred both in Indonesia and Japan over the past two decades.

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