Lives on Hold: Prospective International Students and the #JapanTravelBan

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Japan's COVID-19 response drawing on a survey of more than 3200 prospective international students affected by the (colloquially named) #JapanTravelBan. The paper charts the evolution of Japan's COVID-19 response from the earliest border restrictions in February 2020 to the eventual blanket re-opening to international students in Summer 2022. Subsequently, survey DATA provide evidence of (1) the drastic mental health effects for prospective international students during this time, (2) students' loss of agency due to the protracted uncertainty of both policy and communication from the Japanese government, and (3) potential damage caused to Japan's reputation as a study destination. Drawing on these findings the paper offers broader suggestions for appropriate student migration policymaking: greater transparency, attention to students' security throughout their study sojourn, an emphasis on stability, and resilience to crises.

Keywords: international student mobility, student migration, Japan, COVID-19, mental health

Content warning: extended discussion of mental health challenges and suicide

Waves of internationalization policy have made Japan a leading study abroad destination within East Asia (Ota, 2018; Yonezawa, 2020). In 2019, Japan met its long-term goal to host 300,000 international students, with 95% of those students hailing from within the region (JASSO, 2022; Kuwamura, 2022). Policy levers used to drive this increase included establishing new English-medium courses and building recruitment offices in key source countries (Kuroda et al., 2018). Japan also joined a growing cohort of countries to explicitly place international students within their skilled migration policies, as student attraction and retention became a critical component of Japan's evolving relationship with migration (Chung,

2022; Liu-Farrer, 2020; Ziguras & Law, 2006). A number of reforms aimed to improve retention of international students post-study, including dedicated job-hunting visas and expanded access to the labour market during their studies (Brotherhood, 2023). However, the steady progress of the previous decades was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2020, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) published a report titled "Education in Japan beyond the crisis of COVID-19: Leave No One Behind." The report outlined the measures being implemented in to support different communities of students through the pandemic (MEXT, 2020). Within higher education, the report recognized that almost no new international students had been able to come to Japan for the 2020 academic year, while many others were either stranded outside Japan and unable to resume their studies. It announced the allocation of 150 million US$ additional financial support for students to continue their studies and urged universities to be flexible in adapting to changing student needs. However, flexibility was not possible in relation to border restrictions. Most prospective international students would be unable to enter Japan for more than two years, in what became known as the #JapanTravelBan.

This travel ban is one of many stories of the effects of COVID-19 on international student mobility (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021). National governments responded to the pandemic by implementing border control measures ranging from laissez-faire to total lockdown. At the one end of the spectrum, the United Kingdom and United States implemented short-term and limited travel bans during intense waves of infection but placed a high priority on mobility at the expense of broader spread. In contrast, the Japanese government was cautious and restricted mobility, though not to the same extent as the near total isolation strategies implemented by China and New Zealand (Mathieu et al., 2022). Despite national differences, the pandemic brought a fundamental disruption to international student mobility. Many students postponed or cancelled their studies, with drops of international enrolments being between 10 and 20 percent for leading host nations (Mok et al., 2021; Nakasato & Kayashima, 2021). Many who remained enrolled were forced to learn online as universities scrambled to adapt (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). Some flew home to the relative security of their families, while others were stranded at their study destination (Y. Hu et al., 2022; Iftikhar et al., 2022; McDermid et al., 2022). Throughout, reports of the resilience of students emerged (Firang & Mensah, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Murata, 2022b), and the importance of adequate support measures (Amoah & Mok, 2022; Moscaritolo et al., 2022), but so too did reports of disruption to their education, mental health, and wellbeing (Chen et al., 2020; Q. Hu & Umeda, 2021).

At time of writing in late 2022, the ability to travel internationally is rebounding (IATA, 2022). However, we must not forget that students who entered university in the context of the pandemic may still be with us. A lost cohort, discouraged or prevented from studying abroad, may also exist. Critically, while acute mental health concerns may have subsided, it remains to be seen how these will play out in the in coming years (Yang et al., 2022). It is imperative that

academic attention continues to unpack governments' crisis response, and the lessons that can be learned (Amoah & Mok, 2022).

In this paper, I aim to contribute to this discussion in the following ways. First, I reorient the conversation to also consider those who were, at the time, prospective international students pre-study. This complements existing research considering international during-study, and furthers an emerging conversation regarding the responsibilities of governments and universities to ensure students' security pre-, during- and post-study (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Brotherhood, 2023; Marginson et al., 2010). Second, I offer a rigorous analysis of the travel ban in Japan, drawing on government policy documents and public communications. Third, I offer a ground-up critique of these policies drawing on the experiences of more than 3000 potential international students surveyed during the pandemic. Finally, I reflect on the practical implications of the travel ban and connect these findings with the developing literature on migration infrastructures and international student mobility, and particularly resilient support systems to ensure the physical and mental security of international students even in the context of global crises.

MIGRATON INFRASTRUCTURES, INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SECURITY, AND COVID-19

Critical discussion of international students increasingly considers them as a distinct subgroup of international migrants within the broader migration infrastructures of modern states (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Brotherhood, 2023; Marginson et al., 2010). This turn was driven by policy changes in the late 1990s, when countries began to international education strategies that were supported by targeted regulations for student mobility and post-study transitions (Ziguras & Law, 2006). However, echoing broader criticisms of the regulatory frameworks used to manage regular migration routes, these student-migration pathways are often heavily flawed in their design and implementation (Riaño et al., 2018). Research reveals that the frameworks themselves and the information provided to international students may be often difficult to parse and pursue (O'Connor, 2018). International students are often politicised and vulnerable to discrimination, while they lack support structures (Lomer, 2018; Marginson et al., 2010). Regulatory frameworks are also changeable on temporal scales much shorter than a typical degree program, putting students at risk of disruption mid-trajectory (Brotherhood, 2020; Mares, 2018).

This body of research seems to suggest that regulatory frameworks for student migration do not typically provide a safe and secure environment for many international students, and attention has turned to considering what a more effective framework could look like. The United Nations' (UN) Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) provides some suggestions for how to conceptualize and implement a safe and secure migratory environment and has been the subject of widespread academic attention (e.g., Atak et al., 2018; Kraly & Hovy, 2020; Newland, 2019). The Marrakech Compact, of which Japan is a signatory, offers a broad framework for creating a safe environment for

international migrants, and has been praised for promoting a whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach that activates institutions across society for the purpose of protecting migrants (Newland, 2019). The Compact's scope is broad, but the following recommendations are particularly relevant to international student migrants:

(3) Provide accurate and timely information at all stages of migration.
(7) Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration.
(12) Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures.
(UN, 2018, p. 5-6)

In light of these recommendations, it has been argued that international students should be offered transparency (3), security (7), and stability (12) in their migratory journey (Brotherhood, 2020, 2023). However, as the research reviewed at the start of this section indicates, this is not the case even in established host nations. Firang and Mensah (2022) demonstrate that students' temporary immigration status can lead to their exclusion from government support programs. Similarly, many remained trapped overseas without functioning support structures (Amoah & Mok, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Malet Calvo et al., 2022; Sato et al., 2022; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). Across the world, regulatory frameworks and support systems for international student migrants were not effective at adapting to the pandemic.

A small number of studies considered these issues in Japan. Qu and Umeda's (2021) study included a cohort of international students, and identified high levels of mental health challenges. Institutional case studies have corroborated these reports, identifying mental health and educational disruption (Higo, 2021; Horita et al., 2022; Murata, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). In this context, Nakasato and Kayashima (2021) found that international students place a particular emphasis on safety and successfully completing their course, over the study experience. In addition, a small number of studies have looked at the travel ban itself, primarily from a political perspective. Bekeš (2020) noted a contradiction between the government's stated intention to emphasise "coexistence with foreigners" (gaikokujin to no kyousei) and the blanket ban on foreign nationals. This is echoed by Vogt and Qin (2022), who likened the travel ban to Japan's "closed country" (sakoku) period. To date, only one paper has focused on the effects of the travel ban on migration flows. Korekawa's (2021) study recounted the policy levers used to close the borders, but did not directly analyse international students or student migration. In sum, this research has offered valuable insight into the challenges faced by international students in Japan, and the political context of the travel ban, but the nature and effects of the travel ban for prospective students are still largely unknown.

METHOD

This paper has two phases of analysis: (1) policy trajectory analysis of Japan's COVID19 response, and (2) analysis of online survey data. The first phase

considers the nature of Japan's COVID-19 policy response, with a focus on transparency, security and stability. The second provides analyses effects of the travel ban on prospective international students, with an emphasis on mental health effects, their loss of agency, and their changing relationships with Japan. In conjunction, these methods provide a comprehensive overview of both the nature and consequences of the #JapanTravelBan, revealing practical implications for both migration policymaking and institutional support services for international students in times of crisis.

For phase one of the study, I first assembled a database of policy documents and public communications from seven government ministries contributing to the COVID-19 response. These documents were drawn from official government websites, video and audio recordings, and transcriptions, and monthly statistical releases on the government's e-Stat portal. I created an exhaustive collection of official communications of policy change from Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) consular services website, via which changes were communicated to consulates and students around the world. These documents were then analysed chronologically using a deductive method focusing on transparency, security, and stability to understand the nature of the travel ban and how it affected international students.

Phase two of the study draws on a third-party survey distributed in English and Japanese by EducationIsNotTourism. This association was formed in 2021 by representatives of several Japan-based universities and language schools and their stated mission is to "provide public relations support activities to ensure fair and uniform rules concerning the immigration of international students" (EducationIsNotTourism, 2021). These activities include creating an online community for international students trapped outside Japan, providing up-to-date information to the international student community, and policy advocacy. As part of these advocacy efforts, EducationIsNotTourism distributed an online survey to their readership between January and February 2022. The goal was to collect the perspectives of prospective international students affected by the travel ban with an emphasis on the financial and mental health effects of the travel ban, and their evolving relationship with Japan as a study destination. The survey consisted of 22 questions, four of which were demographic, with 18 being a combination of 14 closed questions and 4 open-ended short answer questions. In total, 3219 students responded to the survey before the end of February 2022. Key demographic data for respondents is shown in Figure 1.
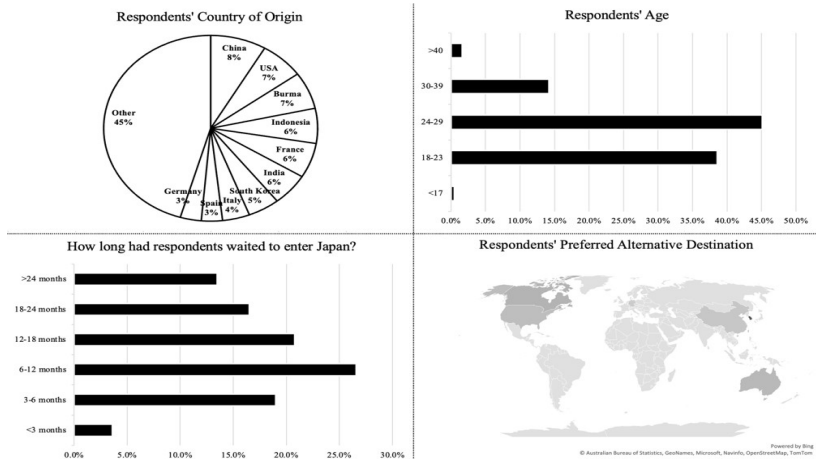
Figure 1: Key demographic data of EducationIsNotTourism survey respondents

For reasons explained in the limitations section below, analysis focuses on (n=7417) responses to the following four short-answer questions:

1. If applicable, please describe how the Japan Travel Ban has affected your mental health. (n=1534)
2. If applicable, please describe how the Japan Travel Ban has affected your physical health. (n=2211)
3. If applicable, please describe how the Japan Travel Ban has affected your financial condition. (n=1972)
4. If your opinion [of Japan as a study destination] has changed, please can you tell us how your opinion has changed? (n=1700)

The responses to these questions totalled more than 400,000 words. These responses were consolidated using NVivo release 1.6.2 and analysed thematically. Initially top-level nodes were created according to the themes of the four open ended questions: (1) mental health, (2) physical health, (3) financial condition, and (4) opinion of Japan. The responses to each question were then analysed in-turn according to a Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The exact implementation is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Adapted framework for thematic analysis

Steps of a thematic analysis	Exact process for the present study
Step 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	All data were read twice – initially skimmed for keywords before a close reading.

Step 2: Generating initial codes	In a second close reading, initial codes were developed to record and categorise interesting and recurring ideas.
Step 3: Searching for themes	After all coding was completed, codes were sorted and compiled into themes.
Step 4: Reviewing themes	Themes were checked for internal and external homogeneity. If changes were made, overlapping themes were re-coded.
Step 5: Defining and naming themes	The themes were finalized and given a clear definition/description within the NVivo database.
Step 6: Producing the report	Following a supplementary literature review, themes that were prevalent in the data were selected for inclusion in the final manuscript.

The responses were analysed according to steps one to five of this framework. Finally, a fifth top-level code was introduced to the NVivo database: "Interplay". Steps two to five were then repeated with all data, with a focus on developing themes to describe the interplay between the initial four top-level nodes.

Research ethics and limitations

Ethical and methodological issues in this paper stem from the fact that I, the author, did not personally collect the raw survey data. Beginning with ethical issues, during data collection participants were informed that their responses and words would be shared (free of identifying information) for the purposes of documenting the effects of the #JapanTravelBan. Potential participants were informed that "by sharing your details you are agreeing that your information can be used" for this purpose. Thus, participants gave informed consent. In addition, following discussion of my intentions and methodology, the EducationIsNotTourism team gave permission to analyse and publish the survey responses in an academic context on the condition that the database itself is not shared further and that no identifying information is revealed. Finally, this manuscript was sent to the manager of the survey prior to publication to confirm that data had been used according to their conditions.

Methodologically, there are limitations to this survey instrument. First, respondents were disproportionately likely to be actively seeking support and information on how to enter Japan. International students who had already changed their plan to study in Japan are unlikely to be represented to the same

degree. Indeed, only 7% of respondents reported that they had cancelled their studies in Japan. It is also evident that that Americans, Europeans and Burmese citizens are over-represented relative to the population of international students in Japan, while Chinese, Vietnamese and Nepalese students are under-represented within this sample, perhaps due to EducationIsNotTourism being a largely English-speaking platform. Furthermore, some of the research items were not appropriate for statistical analysis. For this reason, analysis presented in this paper is restricted to qualitative analysis of short answer responses. Recognizing these limitations, I followed the recommendations of Freeman et al. (2007), to report the research methods in detail, engage openly with the limitations of the research and pay particular attention to alternative explanations. I hope that a commitment to these recommendations is evident in this manuscript. As a final note, no comparable database exists and, despite these limitations, there is no better way to offer a comprehensive account of Japan's COVID-19 response and its effects on prospective international students.

FINDINGS

Phase 1: Policy trajectory analysis of Japan's COVID-19 response

The first year of the pandemic was marked by instability for prospective students, with sudden and drastic changes to border measures. Entry restrictions were first introduced for foreign travelers in early February 2020. On March 27th, a blanket ban was introduced, suspending the validity of new entry visas for travelers from a list of 61 countries (MOFA, 2020a). This applied to newly issued student visas, including for applicants had already received their Certificate of Eligibility (COE) . For the next six months, border measures expanded the suspension of visa validity to more countries, such as the May 27th addition of 11 new countries (MOFA, 2020b), and 18 more on July 1st (MOFA, 2020c). Throughout, it was impossible for prospective students to enter Japan (MEXT, 2020). In effect, this marked the beginning of the travel ban that would continue to affect prospective international students for the next two years.
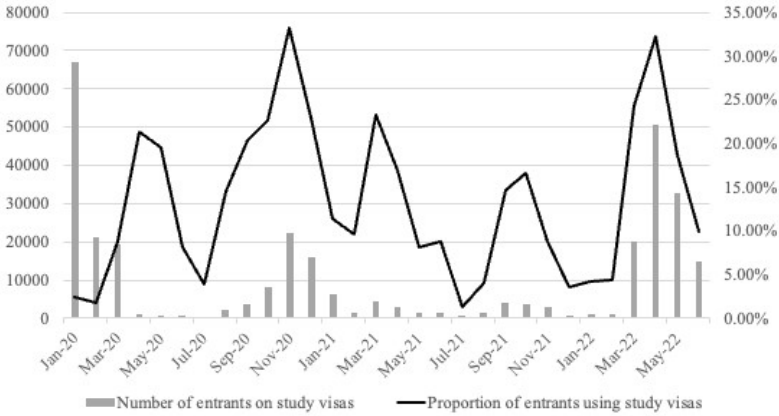
Figure 2: Japan border entry trend for those on study visas, January 2020 to June 2022 (adapted from e-Stat, 2022).

In early July 2020, Japan announced a tentative easing focused on re-entry. MEXT confirmed that students sponsored by the government would continue to receive financial support (MEXT, 2020) and efforts began to ease restrictions for students to return to Japan, evident in the uptick in inbound mobility in late summer shown in Figure 2. However, the validity of new visas remained suspended until early October 2020, when prospective students were encouraged to seek entry to Japan as soon as possible. Students rushed to take advantage, but strict quotas remained due to COVID-19 testing capacity (MOFA, 2020d). Furthermore, many institutions were discouraged from accepting students at short notice, as they would be legally responsible for potential breaches of quarantine measures (Boyd & Osumi, 2021). Despite this a small number of new international students were able to enter Japan and commence their studies until the alpha variant of COVID-19 triggered a new wave of infections (WHO, 2022). In December, entry restrictions were re-introduced and, by early January 2021 it was once more impossible for prospective international students to enter Japan.

While 2020 was marked by instability of border measures, 2021 offered a more stable policy landscape marked instead by a lack of transparency. The government sent mixed messages to prospective students, refusing to offer timeframes and giving some misleading public statements. For instance, on March 16th, 2021, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato publicly announced that prospective international students could be considered on a case-by-case basis (Kato, 2021). However, this was not permitted under the official entry procedures and was never implemented (MOFA, 2021). Similarly, in early June, it was announced that government-sponsored students would be granted entry (Ryugaku Shimbun, 2021), but many host universities were not immediately prepared to accept them (MEXT, 2021). For the majority of students, COEs continued to be issued and extended at roughly one-month intervals (Immigration Services Agency, 2021), but the entry ban also continued to be extended at a similar pace.

This pattern continued in November 2021 when the government suddenly announced its intention to re-open the border, specifically prioritizing business and international students (Nakamura, 2021). Just days later, on November 8th, the travel ban was officially lifted (Kihara, 2021). This appeared to answer the prayers of prospective students, until the announcement that students would not enter Japan at the earliest opportunity, but rather in a phased re-opening based on the date on which their COE had been first issued, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Phased reopening for privately financed students to return to Japan

Date of COE issue	Application period opens	Expected travel date
Jan – Mar 2020	Nov 2021	Dec 2021
Jan – Sep 2020	Dec 2021	Jan 2021
Jan 2020 – Mar 2021	Jan 2022	Feb 2021
After Apr 2021	TBC	TBC

As indicated, many students faced a wait of more than four months, at which point the 2021 Fall semester would have concluded. Many more were still not granted clarity on their timeline.

To make matters worse, instability returned when the omicron variant was the rationale for another blanket border closure on November 30th, less than a month after the re-opening was announced (Swift & Lies, 2021; WHO, 2022). The ban was re-introduced for an initial period of one month, requiring students to continue to be prepared to leave at short notice, but it was again extended repeatedly and only eventually lifted in March 2022 (Nagata, 2022).

Thus, it was only in March 2022 that prospective students gained clarity about their prospects. The border re-opened, this time for good, and the phased entry system was scrapped. Soon thereafter, the "Scheme for Smooth Entry of International Students" was announced to fast-track the return of international students for the new academic year (MEXT et al., 2022). Figure 2 shows how this program successfully kick-started the long-awaited re-opening of Japan's borders to international students, with 20,000 students entering in March and 50,000 in April (e-Stat, 2022). Finally, by June 2022, the travel ban for international students was effectively over.

Phase 2: Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions

Mental health impacts

Narratives of a descent into depression and anxiety were prevalent and often tied directly to the travel ban. One participant described how their life had "deteriorated" to the point where they were "constantly hopeless… constantly anxious," while another decried how their lifelong optimism had been replaced

by "despair and numbness". Indeed, self-described optimists struggling for the first time in their lives with anxiety or depression was a common pattern in the data, illustrated by this passage:

> I used to be a very optimistic and cheerful person. Everyone used to see me as a happy person. Since the travel ban (specifically the Kishida-era travel ban) I have become bitter, depressed, toxic and, when I look back at the times I hoped to fly, I felt fragile, helpless and alone.

Some participants (~50) discussed suicide in direct relation to the travel ban. Mostly, this took the form of intrusive ideation, with one participant revealing how "suicidal thoughts come and go," while others described them as "daily" or "common." Participants described turning to professional help and/or medication to deal with these symptoms, while others admitted to acts of self-harm. Several participants revealed attempting to take their own life. One remarked:
"because of this entry ban I can't able to move [sic]… I lost everything in my life, maybe soon it'll also end, if this ban continues. My life is at stake."

Loss of agency

A striking loss of agency was also evident in the data. Participants perceived a loss of control over their lives and a sense of "paralysis." The lack of clarity regarding lifting the ban meant that potential students were not able to plan or accept new jobs or accommodation in their home countries. One participant argued that they were "unable to commit to any job or courses since there is no clear timeframe," while another stated: "I cannot start anything here nor make long term plans in my country because I am endlessly waiting for Japan to open their borders and leaving for my new life." Respondents felt encouraged to keep pursuing their studies in Japan, often citing the monthly extension of their COEs. However, they reported being in "limbo" or "purgatory," unable to fully experience or commit to their overseas study or their life at home. Students described their lives as "on hold," reduced to "waiting for a definitive answer" regarding their opportunities in Japan.

Within this "limbo," potential students were disarmed by the uncertainty of the situation and suffered a loss of personal agency. At this point, there was nothing they could do to increase their chances, and participants described any efforts to do so as "pointless" and "degrading." Some tried to empower themselves by "constantly checking for news" across government websites, web forums and social media, and collecting up-to-date information on entry restrictions and/or searching for "any positive news that might give some hope." Others found this process distressing, reporting insomnia due to a desire to check Japanese news as soon as possible from a different time zone, and "obsessing" over every new scrap of information. Some students reported tuning out of all news to try and maintain a more even mental state.

Complicated relationships with Japan

Participants' responses show changing relationships with Japan. In the first instance, hundreds of participants stated that they "love" or had loved Japan. As one described, "I loved Japan since I was eight or nine. I taught myself Japanese!... Even the word 'Japan' makes my heart itch." However, the conditions of the travel ban made some re-assess these feelings. For some participants, frustration at the border measures had complicated their relationship to the country more broadly. One participant described this as follows:

> These "waterfront measures" (which do not work, as is evidenced by the current wave) has deterred many people from pursuing studies in Japan. It is not only us, those who are waiting now, but those who will try to come after us, that will hear the message that these measures have: "you are not welcome in Japan.

In some cases, participants became disillusioned specifically with the government and migration authorities. One argued that the whole situation was "badly managed," another stated that they had "zero faith in the government" while another admitted "starting to really hate Japan, or at the very least their leaders." Much of this frustration appeared tied to a sense of unfair treatment from the government. As one participant described, "it was obvious they didn't care, and it was just a mockery."

Importantly, participants indicated that the travel ban had changed their perspective of Japan as a study destination. There was widespread frustration that international students had not been a priority. Many were frustrated that policy did not meaningfully distinguish legitimate students and tourists. Some were unsure whether they could comfortably study in Japan following their treatment throughout the travel ban: "I've been contemplating if by any miracle I am able to enter Japan, will I be able to live peacefully there knowing that such country [sic] hated me as a foreign student?" Others regretted having committed time and energy to learning the language, and some stated explicitly that they would not recommend other potential students to consider Japan.

DISCUSSION

Looking first at phase one of this study, the results of the policy trajectory analysis indicate that the #JapanTravelBan did not align with several of the recommendations from the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (UN, 2018). Recommendation 3, focusing on transparency through accurate and timely information provision, was repeatedly broken. Important policies were announced to the public without the necessary detail, falsely raising the hopes of thousands stranded overseas. In both September 2020 and November 2021, re-opening announcements were sudden, coming in one case just four days before changes were implemented. Echoing earlier research (Brotherhood, 2020; Mares, 2018), the temporal scales of these changes were so short as to make

considered planning impossible for prospective students. Furthermore, in each case, the release of misleading information served to misinform prospective students. These findings corroborate existing research showing that student migration infrastructures are not communicated clearly in terms that students themselves can understand (O'Connor, 2018).

Turning to the 12th recommendation, to maintain stability by offering certainty and predictability in migration procedures, similar patterns were identified. The government consistently refused to give clear timeframes for the re-opening, instead extending entry restrictions in short increments of one month or even just a few weeks, timeframes that were difficult or impossible to meet for prospective students overseas. This again echoes existing research that identified the uneasy overlap of timeframes for individual students and government policies as a severe issue in the design and implementation of policies governing student migration (Brotherhood, 2020; Mares, 2018; Riaño et al., 2018).

Returning to recommendation 7, concerned with addressing and reducing vulnerability was also not met, with prospective international students unable or ineligible to access the support mechanisms that MEXT and sponsoring organizations were offering to those resident in or returning to the country (MEXT, 2020). This exclusion from support programs echoes Firang and Mensah's (2022) findings, corroborating once more the issue of international students falling through the cracks of support services. Furthermore, it was evident that prospective students to Japan experienced comparable mental health challenges that have been widely reported in the lives of international students already in the host country (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Q. Hu & Umeda, 2021). A novel finding is that, while many international students experienced a degree of isolation from their support structures during COVID-19 (Gomes et al., 2021; Malet Calvo et al., 2022; Mok et al., 2021; Sato et al., 2022; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022), isolation and loss of agency may be particularly keenly felt by prospective students who may be closer to the support mechanisms of their host country but particularly isolated from the practical and systematic support services offered by host governments and institutions. In summary, corroborating earlier research critical of the design and implementation of student migration policy measures and communication practices (Riaño et al., 2018), government interventions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to disrupt the planning capabilities of prospective international students, leaving them vulnerable and misinformed throughout much of the travel ban. This vulnerability was only exacerbated by the students' isolation from support mechanisms offered through both the national government and specific host institutions.

The findings of phase two further emphasise how prospective students' security was put at risk by the travel ban, and corroborate and compliment earlier research on the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the international student community (Chen et al., 2020; Q. Hu & Umeda, 2021) by drawing attention to the challenges faced by prospective international students waiting to travel. The findings of this survey echo earlier research in charting the startling prevalence and severity of mental health issues among this community (Gomes et al., 2021; Malet Calvo et al., 2022; Mok et al., 2021; Sato et al., 2022;

Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022), and provide some preliminary evidence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between these mental health issues and uncertainty caused by the border closures that particularly affect prospective students. On the one hand, participants' deteriorating mental health states were often attributed to the uncertainty of the travel ban and the need to live in extended "limbo". At the same time, this uncertainty stripped prospective students of their agency, the loss of which appeared to also feed back into negative mental health patterns. Throughout, students were left to navigate this limbo with little support from their host universities corroborating earlier research documenting the insufficiency of information offerings and support systems for international students (Amoah & Mok, 2022; Moscaritolo et al., 2022). Finally, phase two also showed how the travel ban has complicated the relationship between a generation of international students and Japan, causing many to reconsider it as a study destination. The consequences will play out over several years, but given the importance placed on international students in universities and wider society (Chung, 2022; Kuroda et al., 2018; Liu-Farrer, 2020), the Japanese government should be alerted that prospective students experiences of the travel ban and the lack of support they received may have soured the positive reputation that Japan was building as a study destination.

CONCLUSION

The government has confirmed that international students will continue to be at the heart of its internationalisation efforts post-COVID (Kuwamura, 2022). Despite this, the results of this study expand upon existing research to show that student migration infrastructures in Japan do not ensure the security of international students, and are not resilient to crisis. The experiences of the participants of this study reveal that insecurity extends to prospective students, as well as those in the country, and that the support systems on offer were inadequate in protecting their mental and physical health. While COVID-19 represents an unprecedented crisis in contemporary higher education, if Japan is to continue to attract and retain international students, lessons must be learned from the #JapanTravelBan. Practically, it may be fruitful to refocus on the recommendations of the Marrakech Compact, and endeavour to create migration infrastructures that are more transparent, stable, and prioritise students' security throughout the study abroad experience. Simultaneously, such changes must be supported by a theoretical endeavour to consider where the responsibility to support migrant students should lie (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Brotherhood, 2023; Marginson et al., 2010). Until now, higher education institutions and, to a lesser extent, national governments have shared the majority of this burden, but there are still clear weaknesses in these support systems. A point to consider in future research is the whole-of-society approach that the Marrakech Compact recommends (UN, 2018). This may suggest that universities, as both the legal sponsors of international students and large institutions integrated in both international and local communities, should assume greater responsibility for offering and coordinating support for the students in their care pre- and post-study

(UN, 2018). Importantly, an explicit discussion regarding the necessity to ensure the security of international students may enable agile and effective crisis responses in future. In closing, future research on international student migration may focus on normative questions regarding universities' support responsibilities to the students in their care, but also seek to understand the specific support demands of different communities of international students to develop systems that are more effective, culturally sensitive, and resilient to future crises.

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