

International Student Recruitment as a Lifeline for Demographic Survival and Institutional Community Building: Universities in South Korea and Japan

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Amid demographic collapse, mid- and low-tier universities in Japan and South Korea face growing precarity, particularly those in non-metropolitan regions. This paper explores how these universities and their respective national governments are repositioning themselves through internationalisation, not only as a response to enrolment pressures, but as a strategy for sustaining institutions and their communities. Drawing on findings from documentary analysis of policy materials and university strategy documents, the study examines how internationalisation is framed and operationalised in ways that reflect concerns about institutional survival and regional engagement. Focusing on four universities in Japan and South Korea, this paper adopts a comparative lens to explore how internationalisation—often framed as a competitive, elite-driven endeavour—can also function as a strategy of institutional care and community maintenance.

Full paper

As demographic decline accelerates across East Asia, the effects on higher education systems are becoming increasingly pronounced. In countries such as Japan and South Korea, total fertility rates have fallen to 1.2 and 0.7 respectively—among the lowest in the world (Population Reference Bureau, 2024). Private and lower-status institutions are most directly affected, prompting responses such as closures, mergers, and transitions from single-sex to co-ed institutions.

Against this backdrop, international student recruitment is emerging as a critical institutional strategy. While there is a small body of literature examining the internationalisation strategies of mid- or low-tier universities, it has primarily focused on their rationales for leveraging internationalisation—either as a means to elevate their status to ‘first-tier’ (de Wit, Yemini & Martin, 2015) or the implications of national internationalisation policies seeking on higher education (Bamberger & Kim, 2023; Unser-

Schutz, Kudo & Rose, 2023; Zheng & Choi, 2024). This paper offers an alternative perspective by examining how universities operating on the margins—both geographically and institutionally—are adopting internationalisation as a way to navigate demographic crisis.

This paper draws on findings from a qualitative documentary analysis of publicly available national internationalisation policies, related regulations and reports, press releases, and selected university strategy documents from each country. The universities were chosen based on their geographic location (capital vs non-capital regions) and institutional status (mid- or low-tier), as they offer compelling examples of how internationalisation strategies are being adapted in response to acute demographic and institutional pressures.

The preliminary analysis of documentary sources reveals a shift in the framing of internationalisation. Where it was once associated primarily with excellence, global competition, and research visibility, more recent narratives in both countries place greater emphasis on counteracting domestic demographic decline, regional revitalisation, and ensuring institutional sustainability and survival (MEXT, 2024a, 2024b). For example, both Japan's *J-MENA Project* (Global Network Project to Promote Study in Japan for the Middle East & North Africa) and South Korea's *Study in Korea Project* explicitly promote outreach to non-traditional regions (e.g., Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia) not only to diversify international student flows and support regional universities facing enrolment decline, but also to foster a more compassionate and community-oriented vision of higher education—one that cultivates individuals committed to contributing to local communities and creating meaningful, global impact (MEXT, 2020; MOE, 2023). In other words, what emerges from this documentary analysis is a reframing of internationalisation not just as a competitive strategy, but as a form of institutional care and community maintenance. In contexts where the very future of some institutions is uncertain, internationalisation becomes a way of expressing commitment to staff, students, and the broader regions these universities serve.

By drawing attention to these practices and narratives—through specific case studies of four universities in Japan and South Korea—this paper challenges common framings of internationalisation as primarily market-oriented or elite-driven. Instead, it presents internationalisation as a site of potential institutional compassion and collective care. These insights, though preliminary, point to a more nuanced understanding of how institutions on the periphery are reshaping their identities and functions—not only to survive, but also to continue serving as meaningful educational communities.