Refugees by Another Name: Ukrainian Evacuees and Displaced Learners in Japanese Higher Education

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Centre for Global Higher Education Seminar

9 November, 2023

Introduction

- Japan has one of the lowest rates of refugee admissions in the world, typically approving **less than 1% of asylum applications in a given year**. However, its higher ed sector has pursued robust internationalization
- A **side door to displaced learners from conflict areas** appears to be slowly opening, starting in a limited capacity in 2017 and expanding considerably w/ the invasion of Ukraine
- Displaced learners are not given official refugee status; they receive temporary permission to remain
- This chapter examines **HEI staff perspectives on these "refugees by another name"** – we ask how and to what extent Japanese HEIs are able to support this newly-defined and dynamic group

Background

- Japan was 4th highest governmental donor to the UNHCR in 2022 yet in 2020 the Ministry of Justice recognised only 47 applicants as refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2022)
- 3 fellow OECD member states hosted 1,000,000+ refugees in 2019: Colombia, Germany, and Turkey (Amnesty International, 2022). Given this state of play, it is useful to briefly parse the legal + policy framework limiting resettlement in the Japanese context, identifying ways in which displaced people experience policy liminality (Unangst & de Wit, 2021)
- As summarised by the Japan Association for Refugees in 2017, key challenges include: the interpretation of “persecution” is extremely narrow; asylum seekers must provide objective proof that they cannot return to their home country; all relevant documents are available in Japanese only, neutral interpreters may unavailable, and rejected applicants are not given an explanation as to grounds for rejection

- ***A single dataset regarding displaced learner enrollment in HE does not exist***

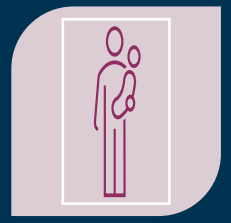
Conceptual framework

Critical Policy Analysis + Internationalization of HE

- By policy liminality, we refer to learners being “positioned between [policy] discourses rather than being centered within a cohesive suite of federal, state, and institutional-level policy initiatives” (Unangst et al., 2022, p. 44), a circumstance w/ import for future policy iteration
- How can we understand the alignment of Japanese internationalisation policy w/ refugee policy? Internationalisation here refers to – as defined by Knight (2003) – “the process of integrating international, intercultural or global dimensions into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 2)

Characterizing the HE landscape

FUNDING



ADMISSION

GOVERNANCE

CAMPUSES

All 777 Japanese HEIs develop tailored admissions policies, but all require an entrance examination as a prerequisite per Yonezawa (2017)

Limited engagement w/ displacement… but there are exceptions

Ex. Syrian Scholars Initiative developed by a foundation associated with International Christian Uni + Japan Association for Refugees to support Syrians; **6** were served

Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees (JISR) operated by the Japanese International Cooperative Agency, announced it would welcome up to **150** MA level Syrian students over 5 yr period; program developed w/ UNHCR and with residency + age requirements (Lebanon/Jordan, 22–39)

Japan has admitted 2, 211 Ukrainians since onset of the conflict (MOJ, 2023). Listings published by the Japan Student Services Organization, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), show 52 Japanese unis hosting ~**200** displaced Ukrainian students, and another 66 Japanese language schools hosting ~ **250** Ukrainians as of March 2023 (JASSO, 2023)

Methods

- 8 interviews conducted w/ staffers based at 4 private universities, 3 public universities, and the Pathways Japan NGO
- Interviews were conducted both in-person + online, in Japanese + English, December 2022-January 2023
- Transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013), with each author independently coding; the authors' thematic notes were then compared and compiled

Findings: student support varies by public/private sector

- All of the public universities sampled were acting independently of any organization/network and exhibited **very little pooling of information or resources**
- Even within public universities, our participants note that there can be very little cooperation across institutional units (or **silos**)
- Each university had admitted a relatively small number of Ukrainian evacuees, between 1-9, and it was **most common for the universities to admit no more than three evacuees**.
- All evacuees who gained admission were **female** and of typical college age

Findings: student support varies by public/private sector

- All universities sampled initially admitted Ukrainian evacuees as **non-matriculated auditing students for up to 1 year**
- Private universities demonstrated more willingness for extension: after an initial 6 month–1 year period, student evacuees seeking to continue study could, upon passing an entrance exam, be admitted as matriculated degree-seeking students and continue to receive identical **financial benefits for the duration of their studies**
- Public staffers indicated that evacuees were only admitted on a short-term basis with **no clear possibility of entering a degree programme**

Findings: visa issues persistent, vary by country of origin

- All students admitted to Japan on short-term visas. In the official parlance, these students are referred to as “evacuees” **(hinanmin),** rather than “refugees” (**nanmin)** (Takahara, 2022). This is an important distinction: recognised refugees are entitled to permanent residency, may bring their immediate families, can participate in government-sponsored resettlement programmes + obtain vocational support at no cost (Akashi, 2021). Student evacuees are not entitled these benefits + are the responsibility of their sponsoring institutions

- After entering Japan on a short-term visa, almost all evacuees changed their status to a “designated activities” visa, rather than a student visa. According to participants, Ukrainians are encouraged by the immigration agency to maintain the designated activities visa, while Syrians + Afghans are discouraged/asked to maintain either a student/working visa, being given a designated activities visa only as a stopgap measure. If Syrians/Afghans apply for a designated activities visa, the processing time is reportedly ~6 months, with a heavy burden of proof. **Ukrainians are reportedly able to obtain the designated activities visa in a matter of hours** with little apparent difficulty

Findings: visa issues persistent, vary by country of origin

- One administrator (Private-1) believes the differential treatment of Ukrainians is a **conscious government decision**: Ukrainians are the victims of aggression, a breach of international law. This is fundamentally different from the civil wars or internal instability that Syrians and Afghans have encountered, thus Ukrainians are entitled to favourable treatment
- Another administrator (Private-2), attributed **favourable Ukrainian treatment to racial preferences** on the part of the Japanese public. In this view the government exhibits a distinct racial bias, likely because of ingrained racist tendencies in Japanese society, which has resulted in more positive media coverage of Ukrainian evacuees + more favourable treatment by government
- As the int'l literature has reflected on the **racist migration + education policies to which displaced learners are subjected** (e.g., Villegas & Aberman, 2019), Japan seems to be implicated alongside other more economically developed countries and this issue must be interrogated further

Findings: funding a constant concern

- **Little variation in funding packages** for student evacuees across public + private unis; all provide free tuition, monthly stipend of 60,000 to 80,000 yen/month for Ukrainian evacuees. Travel expenses to Japan are usually covered as well.
- All universities bear some amount of the financial burden
- 1 private university we studied exclusively utilised its own **internal budget** (Private-3); 1 underwrote evacuees' costs with its own budget and **donations from its alumni association** (Private-2); 1 had a more layered approach, securing additional funding from the **local government, a corporate sponsorship, and through the Nippon Foundation** (Private-1),

Discussion

- Overall, we find a **positive attitude** toward admitting + hosting student evacuees among Japanese HEI constituents, but these learners make up a **very small portion of most universities' student bodies** and there is little relevant staff training
- Public universities appear only able to **accommodate Ukrainian evacuees for one year**, after which their situation is unclear
- Incongruities re: **treatment of different nationalities** should be given attention. There is a perception on the part of some uni administrators that racial biases play a factor in the favourable treatment of Ukrainian evacuees
- For students: their stay is inherently **short-term and precarious**, likely with consequences for individual wellbeing. Is rebuilding in the sending country supported in this context?

Discussion

- *On the policy side, the Japanese government and public must contend with the question of what exactly humanitarian protection entails. Should displaced learners in Japan be admitted on a short-term basis under the responsibility of universities and language schools, which is* ***not the predominant model in economically developed settings****? Are the displaced learners coming to Japan refugees by another name, or do they reflect a* ***new category of temporary, precarious humanitarian protection****?*

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