A Study of Employment Support for International Students during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Owing to the COVID-19 Crisis, finding employment has become harder for international students compared to Japanese students. This paper examines the current environment pertaining to job searches during the pandemic and considers more effective responses in this regard. The author relied mainly on researching the existing literature. International students' transition to domestic employment remained low, with the rate of tentative job offers made to international students during the pandemic extraordinarily low at less than 20% for FY 2020 (April 2020 – March 2021). Only two international students at our university sought employment, and only one received an informal job offer. With the support of government agencies and other institutions, the period during which new graduates could receive assistance in terms of their residential status was extended to three years after graduation to improve the job search environment. However, although individual measures were taken, no actions directly led to an increase in the rate of informal job offers. Other universities created avenues for students to seek advice at their leisure, along with systems provided by outside companies, enabling access to career guidance. The students at the other universities found these changes beneficial. Thus, even with a resolution to the pandemic seeming far-fetched, we better understood the overall situation. Moving forward, we would like to see more specific steps created wherein international students are extended informal job offers.

Key Words: COVID-19, international students, assistance in finding employment, job search-related activities

1 Introduction

The job search timeline for March 2021 graduates transformed into a government-led endeavor when it became clear that the Japan Business Federation, which had hereto played a leading role in such initiatives, announced on October 9, 2018, that the "Guidelines for Recruitment Selection" would be abolished. For the March 2021 graduates, as in the previous year, recruitment information was supposed to be announced and applications accepted in March, with interviews and other selection activities commencing in June. However, nearly 90% of companies began the selection process before the ban on selection was lifted in June, with more than 70% of companies already having issued tentative offers (informal promises of employment). Some companies even made tentative offers before March because of the tendency to hire early. Under such circumstances, the spread of COVID-19 coincided with the job search period, impacting both Japanese and international students (hereinafter, overseas students). This paper first attempts to examine the present state of overseas students' efforts to find employment based on related materials while also

touching upon the actual conditions facing our university's overseas students as they engage in job search-related activities. It subsequently focuses on measures taken by government agencies and other entities on behalf of overseas students. Next, the paper considers other universities, introducing Sophia University and the University of the Sacred Heart's efforts, citing some things our university should consider incorporating. The author concludes by discussing his opinion on the future of aiding overseas students in finding employment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Changes in Domestic Employment of Overseas Students and the Rate of Tentative Offers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The number of overseas students employed in Japan has increased every year since 2010, with the latest tally in 2018 reaching 9,330 students, surpassing 9,000 for the first time (see Fig. 1). The number of graduates and those who completed coursework also increased; therefore, the actual percentage of those engaged in domestic employment was 33.5%, a decline of 1.5% from the previous

year. In the "2016 Revisions to the Japan Revitalization Strategy (June 2, 2016)," the government decided, through a cabinet decision, to improve the employment rate of overseas students in Japan from 30% to 50%. However, the rate stagnated at 30% from 2016, for 3 years. In reality, 65% of all overseas students in Japan want to work, implying that many overseas students who want to work cannot find employment.



Fig. 1 Changes in graduation/coursework completion and domestic employment of overseas students at the university (undergraduate/graduate school) level Source: "Results of the 2018 International Student Career & Bachelor's Degree Conferral Status Survey." Japan Student Services Organization (May 2020).

Moreover, despite various measures undertaken to attain the 20% increase needed to reach the goal, the pandemic's adverse effects have been overwhelming. There has been an increase in the number of companies that, although initially enthusiastic about accepting overseas students, no longer intend to do so. Consequently, this group's employment has been sluggish, making it extremely difficult for these students to receive tentative job offers. Fig. 2 shows the results of the "November Activity Status of the 2021 International Student Employment Monitor Survey" conducted by the Mynavi Corporation. As indicated, 70% of Japanese students had already received job offers in August, while 2.2% of overseas students received offers in May, 18.2% in August, and 18.0% in November. Regarding the reason for the 0.2% decrease from August to November, Mynavi's analysis stated, "while it is possible that we did not get answers from students who had finished their job search-related activities, there is also speculation that many applicants are simply unable to find work in the current job market." Surveys by other research institutes, such as Disco Inc. and Access Nextage Co., Ltd., also showed a uniform decline in tentative job offers extended to overseas students, reflecting the current dire state of affairs.

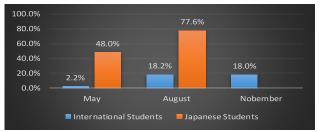


Fig. 2 Comparisons of informal promises of employment made to overseas and Japanese students (%) Source: Mynavi Corp. "November Activity Status of the 2021 International Student Employment Monitor Survey." *Mynavi International Employment*, Dec. 17,

https://saponet.mynavi.jp/release/student/foreignsyuusyoku/21monitor11/

Remarks: For Japanese students, there are no data for November because the final survey was conducted in August.

3 Overseas Students' Job Search-related Activities at Kitami Institute of Technology

Table 1 shows the number of overseas students at school who will graduate or complete their course of study in March 2021. Of these 15 students, 2 engaged in actual job searches, with 1 receiving a job offer at the end of October 2020. The author interviewed this second-year overseas student in the master's Electrical and Electronic Engineering program who received a job offer on January 6, 2021, about his job search-related activities. The interview was conducted in Japanese after the author explained the interview's purpose and obtained the student's consent. The interview consisted of eight questions (see Table 2).

Table 1 Numbers of overseas students at the Kitami Institute of Technology graduating or completing their coursework (March 2021)

Affiliation	Total	Breakdown
Fourth year undergraduate	8	Three repeated their coursework, 3 advanced to graduate school, 2 returned to their home countries
Second year, master's program	2	One received a job offer, 1 was undecided (seeking employment)
Third year, doctorate program	5	One repeated his/her coursework, 2 received job offers (part-time researchers at the university), 1 returned to his/her home country, 1 was undecided

Source: Created by the author

¹ From the "2017 Survey of Living Conditions of Privately-Funded International Students" report by the Japanese Student Services Organization, or JASSO, of January 2019.

Table 2 Questions and answers

	Question	Answer	
1	How many companies participated in the internship?	Three. (August 2019)	
2	When did you begin your job search?	The middle of March.	
3	How many entry companies were there?	Eighteen companies. (3 recommended companies; 15 open applications)	
4	How many offers did you receive, and how long were they for?	One offer from one company, at the end of October.	
5	What difficulties did you encounter?	a) Job search-related activities were suspended and subsequently delayed due to the state of emergency. b) Dealing with online interviews. c) Creating an entry sheet. d) Expressing myself in Japanese. e) Age limit.	
6	What did you do to overcome these difficulties?	a) Practiced interviewing.b) Corrected entry sheets.c) Visited job seeking sites.	
7	What were some factors leading to the tentative offer?	My desire to change the industry.	
8	What kind of support would you have appreciated?	a) Online resume correction. b) Course on SPI coun termeasures. c) Consultation with an advisor when rejected.	

Source: Created by the author

This student applied to 18 different companies. Of the 18 companies, 3 were recommended by the university, and the remaining 15 enrolled via an open application system. Three companies – from Hokkaido, Tokyo, and Shizuoka – participated in the internship program for first-year graduate students. Job search-related activities began in mid-March 2020. The only company extending a tentative job offer was one of the open application companies. The problem was that job searches were delayed with the state of emergency announcement, meaning that job search-related activities were put on hold. This proved to be stressful for the student. Moreover, since interviews were conducted online, communication was difficult. Hence, the interviews often did not go as the student intended. The student also mentioned having difficulties conversing in Japanese during interviews, creating entry sheets and facing an age limit of 30 imposed by the company. The student reported difficulties in a total of five areas. The student engaged in different types of practices to obtain job offers, such as practicing interviews with academic advisors and classmates, requesting corrections of their entry sheets, and gathering information from the past, using the university's career planning system. The student told us that he had previously been seeking employment mainly in electric companies and electronic goods manufacturers. Having failed to secure a job, the student turned to the construction industry, which led to a job offer. This student mentioned that he would have appreciated support in the form of online resume correction, taking an SPI, and consulting with an advisor when receiving a rejection from a company. Although the university has a job search support system, as shown in Fig. 3, this overseas student did not reach out to the Career Planning Support Office because it was hard to find the time to do so. Finally an offer of a job was extended at the end of October of the same year.

After about seven months' worth of effort lasting from mid-March 2020 to the end of October of the same year, one student finally received a job offer, to his great relief. COVID-19 has changed how job searches are conducted, and it is readily apparent that the overseas students experienced a considerable amount of anxiety while attempting to secure employment. Even though, as shown in Fig. 3, the university provides support, mainly in the form of a department tasked with career planning support, the author believes that the lack of detailed online consultations or special support for international students prompted those types of requests. It is necessary to focus on assisting overseas students better in this regard.



Fig. 3 Support system for overseas students at Kitami Institute of Technology Source: Created by the author

4 Measures by Government Agencies and Similar Entities

Regarding overseas students' job searches, there are two cases of direct support and one of indirect support (see Table 3). The first case of direct support involves the October 27, 2020 request by the Ministry for Promoting Dynamic Citizen Engagement, Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare, and the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry to four organizations (Japan Business Federation, Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, National Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, National Federation of Commerce and Industry) to increase the number of years that pertinent individuals may be treated as new graduates. The second case is a change in the treatment of residence renewals implemented by the Immigration

Services Agency.

Regarding the first case, with it being evident that the environment surrounding university students' job searches were adversely affected by COVID-19, companies were notified that they should treat those who graduated college during the past three years as new graduates. This was requested by the four economic organizations noted above. The President of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Mimura, seemed sold on the idea and commented, "This seems like an excellent opportunity for companies experiencing labor shortages to hire good people. I hope that this request will find a ready audience not only in the business community, but also amongst students and schools.2" Regarding the second case – the change in the treatment of the renewal of residence - (1) those for whom job searches may be treated as "specific activities," such activities were usually permitted within a year of graduation. However, owing to COVID-19, it is now possible to renew one's stay beyond this period when seeking employment in Japan. (2) For those who receive an offer and are permitted to engage in "specific activities" up until their actual employment begins, this period typically consisted of a year or less after receiving a tentative job offer and could not exceed one and a half years after graduation. However, if the individual remains in Japan due to COVID-19-induced changes in the scheduled hiring period, the individual can renew the period of stay beyond that. Moreover, it is also possible for both parties to obtain permission for activities that go beyond these qualifications.³

Although not a direct employment measure, as an indirect measure, overseas students are included in the scope of the following five forms of monetary assistance (three provided by the national government, one by local government and one by the university): (1) "Emergency Student Support Assistance" for "continued education," (2) a program to promote the acceptance of overseas students (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Honors Scholarship Program), special additional extention of residence, and second special additional extention of residence; (3) a subsidy to help control the outbreak, (4) the university's own

² NHK NEWS WEB "Job search activities: Government request that four economic organizations 'treat individuals who have graduated within the last three years as new graduate" 2020.10.27 18:56

Student Life Support Fund (60th Anniversary Commemorative Study Assistance Fund), and (5) the Kitami City University Student Life Support Fund. A total of 134 of the university's overseas students (all students are eligible for number 4) received benefits in the form of these 5 cash stipends. However, because the conditions differ for each, not all overseas students received the benefits. The overseas student interviewed stated receiving only ¥15,000 because of income from a part-time job.

Table 3 Types of support offered

	Stipend name/institution	Details	No. of individuals receiving stipend
1	"Emergency Student Support Assistance" for "continued education" (JASSO)	Nationwide target: Roughly ¥430,000 individuals, students from households exempt from municipal taxes eligible for ¥200,000, others ¥100,000	Total 9 overseas students (8 receiving ¥200,000, 1 receiving ¥100,000); 235 Japanese students (34 receiving ¥200,000, 201 receiving ¥100,000)
2	Program to promote the acceptance of overseas students (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Honor Scholarship Program) (JASSO)	Special additional introduction (Oct. 2020), second special additional introduction (Jan. 2021), one-time only allowance of ¥ 48,000	Total 18 overseas students (October 2020: 7 students; Jan, 2021: 11 students)
3	Subsidy to help control COVID-19 (JASSO)	Tuition exemption to be applied for during the second half of 2020; among those receiving an exemption of half their tuition, stipends of ¥10,000 per student will be paid until the budget is exhausted, beginning with students with the lowest estimated household finances	Total 18 overseas students; 62 Japanese students
4	Student Life Support Fund (Kitami City)	All students eligible ¥5,000 charge made to students' ID card using IC function	Total 1,915 individuals (no breakdown), 79 of whom are overseas students (as of January 1, 2021)
5	2020 Kitami Institute of Technology Student Life Support Fund (60th Anniversary Commemorative Study Assistance Fund)	Stipends in the amount of ¥ 100,000, ¥50,000 or ¥30,000, depending on students' degree of financial need	Total 10 international students (3 students received \(\pm\)100,000, 2 students \(\pm\)50,000, 5 students \(\pm\)50,000, 5 students \(\pm\)50,000) Total 238 Japanese students (65 students received \(\pm\)100,000, 89 received \(\pm\)50,000, 84 received \(\pm\)30,000)

Source: Created by the author based on materials provided by the Academic Affairs Division of the Kitami Institute of Technology

Thus, the government gave direct support to international students during their job hunting in Japan. But, regarding the treatment of those who graduated within the last three years, there is a prevailing concern that job searches will be more difficult in the future due to an increase in the number of individuals seeking employment. Although monetary amounts vary when it comes to indirect measures, some assessments showed that support is being provided to those facing financial challenges. Since many of the school's overseas students support themselves with part-time jobs, financial assistance can be used not only for daily necessities, but also for job search-related activities. Therefore, such assistance can be considered effective.

5 Career Support for Students in Other Universities

Universities engaged in various efforts to help their students find employment during the

³ "The renewal of residence for those continuing job search activities or waiting for a job offer due to the effects of the novel coronavirus outbreak" Immigration Bureau of Japan (April 3 and August 8, 2020 updates)

COVID-19 outbreak. KIT holds various employment seminars throughout the year, with all of them held online in 2020. Additionally, Career Advancement Support Center faculty members and career advisors provide career and employment counseling by appointment, except when admission on campus is prohibited. Thus, while the implementation method is different, what constitutes these efforts is the same as the previous years. However, other universities have taken new initiatives in response to current circumstances. The author will focus on two institutions, namely Sophia University and the University of the Sacred Heart. First, Sophia University and the Shinjuku Public Employment Security Office (Hello Work Shinjuku) entered into an "Agreement on Domestic Employment Support for International Students" on November 5, 2020. This agreement between Hello Work and a university to offer international students employment support is the first such initiative in Japan. Activities include (1) dispatching instructors to provide basic knowledge about job search-related activities, (2) providing information on companies that provide internships to international students, (3) providing information on holding joint information sessions and joint job interview workshops for international students sponsored by Hello Work, and (4) providing employment and retention support to international students who have graduated (for one year after graduation/finding employment). Besides providing international students with the information in (1) to (3) as conducted by Hello Work Shinjuku, Sophia University also identifies international students especially interested in domestic employment and individually provides them with detailed relevant support.⁴

In April, the University of the Sacred Heart Career Center will offer online job search support to provide support for job searches in student' homes. In addition to introducing the specialized job search support, artificial intelligence (AI) "Torch-Bot," individuals may participate in online career counseling and individual online staff interviews by making reservations using the Career Center's Career Support System. The AI specializing in job search support was developed by Okazaki Human Resources Consultant Co. Ltd., and it is a mix of chatbots and manned operators, allowing the individual to seek consultation at any given time and

place. This company's system has been adopted, albeit with different names, by other universities, such as Waseda University and Tokyo Women's Christian University. The University of the Sacred Heart offers reservations for online career counseling and individual online staff interviews using the Career Center's Career Support System. A staff member of the Career Center told us, "Even though students cannot go out, we need to continue to offer career support. We will continue to provide career support tailored to each student and their needs.⁵" Students also shared their thoughts, telling us, "I was able to receive fantastic support even while remaining at home, which was a real godsend⁶," and, "I was pleased to find that the chatbot also supports online screening measures, such as video ES (entry sheet) and WEB interviews.7"

This author believes that employment support utilizing corporate know-how and cooperation with external institutions, not just university efforts, is important when it comes to the pandemic. Unfortunately, while KIT has been able to move its hosting process to the online platform, it does not support other functions. As a backdrop to this, the employment offer rate for 2020 at the university exceeded 90% as of January 2021, which is almost the same as an average year (it was 98% for undergraduate students and 100% for graduate students the previous year). When asked why the same support as the University of the Sacred Heart was not offered at KIT, a university representative blamed it on the introduction costs and staff shortage. However, from the students' perspective, the AI and manned chat functions that allow students to freely seek advice at a moment's notice is truly groundbreaking and their cost-effectiveness should have been anticipated. Moving forward, while I would like to encourage the department in charge to reconsider, I also consider it important for faculty members and students to utilize their expertise to develop apps quickly and create a system that can be operated on campus independently.

6 Conclusion

The author found that the COVID-19 outbreak impacted overseas students more than Japa-

⁴ Sophia University "International Student Support Agreement Concluded with Hello Work Shinjuku (Tokyo Employment Service Center for Foreigner Residents)" November 5, 2020

 $https://www.sophia.ac.jp/jpn/news/PR/news1105_kyoutei.\\ html$

⁵ University Press Center "University of the Sacred Heart Career Center Introduces Online Job-Hunting Support During the Coronavirus Outbreak - Utilization of Job Search Support AI and Online Career Counseling" May 12, 2020 https://www.u-presscenter.jp/article/post-43646.html

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

nese students, causing more hardships and fewer job offers. Consequently, the government's targeted employment rate for overseas students of 50% will take time to achieve. The one student, interviewed for this paper, had difficulty with online interviews and there was no online support for the student. However, upon not receiving a job offer, this student changed his target industry, resulting in a job offer where both the decision-making and timing proved advantageous. Al- though government agencies also provide support, it is institutional support, with more personal support being entrusted to important universities and individuals. Some universities offer 24-hour online consultation systems that provide complete support and these can be considered more personal to the student. Although such a system was not in place at this university, as of January 2021, the overall rate of employment offers was over 90%, with the pandemic effects seemingly muted. Serving as a backdrop to this, because there were only two overseas students seeking employment this year as well as due to the school having an engineering and technical focus, compared to students in the liberal arts, the school's Japanese students were in high demand, and for them, job offers were much easier to come by.

This paper examined the assistance provided in finding employment during the COVID-19 pandemic for overseas students. Similar to how ICT was introduced to schools due to closures, it is necessary to think outside the box when it comes to the difficulties overseas students face in searching for employment. Specifically, we believe that overseas students will settle in the region, increasing corporate value and leading to corporate and regional internationalization in the medium to long-term. To be ready for future uncertainties, universities need to take the initiative in coordinating with local governments and companies where the university is located, and not just at the national level, to ensure the ability to assist overseas students in finding employment. We believe that this would help alleviate the difficulties overseas students face in seeking employment and lead to regional internationalization.

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