

Weak yen 'driving decline' in number of Japanese studying abroad

Country is hosting more international students drawn by lure of 'cool Japan' while rising costs keep domestic students at home

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The yen's continued depreciation is discouraging Japanese from studying abroad, a trend that has prompted concerns about "asymmetry" as international students continue to flood into the country, according to scholars.

Last week, the yen fell to a 39-year low of roughly ¥162 per dollar, further inflating the cost of tuition and living expenses for Japanese at overseas universities.

According to the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS), a total of 70,253 students went abroad in 2024 through 39 JAOS member organisations, down from 80,566 in 2018.

The Japanese government has been making efforts to promote international education (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/japanese-higher-education-needs-paradigm-shift>) among local students, and it has set a target of sending 500,000 Japanese students abroad by 2033.

However, it looks unlikely that this policy goal will be met.

Matthew Wilson, dean and president of Temple University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/temple-university>) Japan Campus, said that the depreciation of the yen, as well as inflation outside Japan, has contributed to the sustained fall in the number of Japanese students going abroad.

Everything overseas has gone up, gone up, gone up," he remarked.



Source: Getty Image/ 020 Creative

However, Wilson cautioned that this decline is “not just about the currency”, citing the impact of Covid-19 as well as concerns about safety.

“Japan is incredibly safe,” Wilson argued. “I think, in the eyes of Japanese youth, the thought of going overseas and what is played out in front of them on the internet or in the news are dangerous societies. And that’s not only the United States, but that is also Europe.

“For a young Japanese person or a parent, there is a realisation that they need to globalise and internationalise (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/internationalisation-questioned-japanese-far-right-wins-seats>). But at the same time, to make that leap, particularly when it costs more money, you start to call into question, why would I actually go overseas?

“Higher education is very heavily subsidised here in Japan. Even private universities are incredibly affordable because they’re drawing subsidies.”

Chris Perkins, head of Japanese at the University of Edinburgh (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-edinburgh>), said, “There are other things that are militating against Japanese students coming to the UK and the US.” He told *Times Higher Education* that “one of the things that doesn’t get talked about is actually that the academic years aren’t harmonised.

“The Japanese academic year starts in April, so it’s actually quite difficult to come over for a year to study at a UK university or a US university simply because of the way the semester is structured.

“Another issue is the very institutionalised and formalised method of job hunting for Japanese students. It’s called ‘*Shūkatsu*’, and it’s very formalised. People have to be in particular places at a particular time to take very particular types of interviews. If they miss that period of recruitment, it can be quite difficult to move on.”

Perkins also noted that Japanese students no longer need to go abroad to learn English, because Japanese universities are now increasingly focused on English-language instruction and delivering more English-medium degrees.

Commenting on trends in Tokyo, Daisuke Kudo, who works in the International Collaboration Office at Meiji University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/meiji-university-0>), said that this year, he had seen “a slight decrease in participation in short-term programmes of around one month” compared with 2025.

However, "Participation in medium- to long-term study abroad programmes (approximately three months to one year) has increased in 2026," said Kudo, who is responsible for university-wide outbound mobility programmes at Meiji.

As to how the yen's depreciation has affected student outbound mobility, Kudo said: "For the programmes under my responsibility, we have not yet seen the level of impact that we initially expected.

"However, during study abroad advising, more students and their families are surprised by the increased costs, and we have noticed a rise in enquiries about scholarships and financial support."

What has all this meant for study abroad destinations? Kudo said that the US remains the largest destination – "although its share has gradually declined" – while demand for programmes in northern Europe, eastern Europe and south-east Asia has increased. "These destinations often offer a wide range of courses taught in English, while the cost of living is generally lower than in some traditional destinations," he said.

While a weakened yen may be deterring Japanese students from going abroad, it is not hampering international students from choosing Japan – what Perkins describes as "a big asymmetry". The country has already met its goal of welcoming 400,000 international students, well ahead of its 2033 target date.

The University of Edinburgh (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-edinburgh>) offers study abroad exchanges and placements in Japan, and Perkins has seen an increased appetite among students to visit Japan and learn the language, mentioning "the cool Japan phenomenon" as well as the fascination with the country's culture, especially fiction, anime, music and manga.

Kudo said the numbers of US, French and UK students coming to Tokyo have been rising. He added that this can have its challenges, because most international students cannot speak Japanese and the demand for English-medium programmes is exceeding the supply.

Wilson said that enrolment at the Temple University Japan Campus has "tripled in the last four to five years". A new campus in Kyoto (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/japans-american-university-grows-students-stay-close-home>) was opened last year to keep up with demand, and a second Tokyo location is scheduled to open in August this year.

As of spring 2026, 47 per cent of undergraduate students at Temple were from the US and 30 per cent were from 98 other countries. The remaining 23 per cent of students were Japanese.

Part of the reason behind this bump in international students is that Temple matched its tuition fees to the Japanese market – the degree costs about \$11,000 (£8,204) rather than \$40,000 in the US. But even so, Wilson added, “Across the board, we’re seeing more students that are coming to learn Japanese, more foreign students that are coming into Japanese universities.”

Wilson said that social media has “helped fuel” the interest in Japan. “The more people that come as tourists, they look and they’re like: ‘Wow, this would be a great place to go to school, a great place to live.’”

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