

50 years of ASEAN

ASEAN students increase on high corporate demand

The recent boom in the number of students from ASEAN countries coming to Japan is expected to last until 2020, the target year set by the Japanese government for there to be 300,000 foreign students in the country, industry officials said.

The government in 2008 mapped out a plan to raise the number of foreign students studying in Japan to 300,000 by 2020 to promote globalization in the country and develop diversification in human resources. It is a concerted effort involving six government ministries, including the education, foreign and justice ministries.

The project appears to be on track in part on the back of the recent surge in the number of incoming students from ASEAN nations, statistics show. According to the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), 239,287 foreign students are studying in Japan as of May 1 at educational institutions, including universities, high schools, professional training schools and Japanese-language schools. The figure represents a 14.8 percent increase from a year earlier, following a 13.2 percent rise in the previous period. JASSO provides financial assistance to students, as well as offering support to foreign students studying in Japan and Japanese students studying abroad.

Although students from China make up the largest portion of the total figure, the number of students from some ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Myanmar shows strong growth.

As of May 1, the number of students from Myanmar rose 39.8 percent from a year earlier, followed by a 38.4 percent increase in the number of Vietnamese students and 28.6 percent growth in the

number of students from Indonesia, according to JASSO data. In the same period, the number of Chinese students rose 4.6 percent, the statistics show. In fact, the number of Vietnamese students learning Japanese in language schools (25,228 in the year ended March 31, 2017), exceeded that of Chinese students in the year, according to the data.

The rise in the number of incoming students from ASEAN nations, in particular from Vietnam, Indonesia and Myanmar, is in part due to the countries' economic development, coupled with the increase in the presence of Japanese companies in those countries, said Tomohiro Miyai, deputy director of the Information Service Division at JASSO's Student Exchange Department.

"More Japanese companies are entering the markets in those three countries and that makes students there more familiar with Japan," Miyai told The Japan Times in an interview. "The presence of Japanese companies also offers local students job opportunities there after they finish studying in Japan."

Also behind the boom is the promotion of student recruiting activities by Japanese universities in those countries, as well as their efforts to enhance degree courses offered in English back home, Miyai said.

Rikkyo University in March this year opened an ASEAN office in Jakarta to build and promote a communication network with universities in Indonesia as well as those in neighboring countries, in an attempt to attract more students from the region. The university at present has tie-ups with 21 universities in eight ASEAN nations and has a total of 30 students from those countries, including nine from Thailand and seven from Malaysia.

Sophia University three years ago started a student exchange program with six universities in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. To begin with, the university accepted three foreign students while 15 Japanese students went to the three Southeast Asian nations.

In Bangkok, Meiji University in May 2013 opened the Meiji University ASEAN center at Srinakharinwirot University, to nurture future leaders, as well as develop human resources capable of building bridges between Japan and ASEAN nations. At present, the university has cooperative accords with 39 universities, departments and faculties in eight ASEAN countries.

After graduating from Japanese universities or finishing educational programs in Japan, some ASEAN students return home to work, either for local companies or for Japanese companies back home. Another option for them is to look for a job in Japan, as more Japanese companies are seeking talented and skilled workers from the pool of ASEAN students.

There were 11,328 Japanese companies operating businesses in ASEAN countries as of May 2016, according to Teikoku Databank Ltd., a researcher and provider of Japanese corporate data. Of the total, 25.6 percent are large corporations with annual revenue of ¥10 billion or more, the largest portion, while small companies with annual revenue of less than ¥100 million make up 5.4 percent.

"We have a growing number of job offers especially from small to midsize local Japanese companies," said Kenta Watanabe, president of Node Inc., a provider of online job-matching services specifically focused on students from ASEAN countries. In its first year of operations in



The number of students from ASEAN region is increasing in Japan. JOSAI INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

2014, Node had only 16 Japanese companies as clients. That number has surged to 154, up from 131 last year.

"Their need is to find someone with specific skills, like a CAD (computer-aided design) operator, and they don't have to be Japanese," Watanabe told The Japan Times in an interview. "As a matter of fact, that is the most frequent and pressing demand we receive from our clients."

Since the status of Japanese universities is lower than top-ranking universities in the U.S. and Europe, ASEAN students are inclined to come to Japan to learn practical professional skills and know-how, rather than earning a university degree, JASSO's Miyai explained.

Even so, the Japanese language is a barrier that must be overcome to work at a

Japanese company, in particular at small to midsize concerns. Workers from overseas may not be required to have a high level of Japanese language proficiency if they only have to communicate in-house with their colleagues. But, if they need to talk to clients, even about technical subjects, it would be a different story, Watanabe explained.

Although more Japanese universities are offering academic programs conducted only in English, many local Japanese companies still require foreign job seekers to have a high level of Japanese proficiency. The Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services jointly conduct the Japanese Language Proficiency Test worldwide, a benchmark exam for foreigners seeking to work in

Japan. Of the five levels, the N1 top-level proficiency is said to be required by many Japanese companies.

Watanabe, however, is optimistic about overcoming the language barrier in the long term as he expects even small to midsize companies to be more forgiving with regard to the Japanese ability of foreign workers because "Japanese society is more open than ever before to accepting foreign workers," he said.

With the government's 2008 plan to raise the number of foreign students to 300,000 by 2020, coupled with universities' efforts to attract them, Japan opened the door for studying in the country. Now there should be "an exit" in the form of work opportunities ready for them, Watanabe said.

Program provides international immersion