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Deepening Personalization through Repeated Contact with International Students in Japanese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: *Prior research suggests that contact with international students can encourage Japanese students to see them as individuals rather than category members; however, less is known about how such understanding deepens through repeated contact in everyday campus life. This study examines how Japanese students in student staff roles (teaching assistants, language assistants, and resident assistants) described changes in their understanding of international students and how the responsibilities attached to these roles shaped their relational orientations, thereby connecting research on contact between domestic and international students with research on student staff roles. The study draws on semistructured interviews with 21 participants and adopts grounded theory. It develops an interpretive model of deepening personalization informed by social identity and intergroup contact perspectives. Participants described deepening personalization beyond individuation, involving recognition of diversity among international students, common ground with them, greater familiarity and psychological closeness, reappraisal of Japanese norms and assumptions, and more open engagement with them. These changes were associated with two relational orientations shaped by self-positioning within student-staff roles and the responsibilities attached to those roles: peer-like, reciprocal relationships and staff-like, role-based relationships. The findings suggest that deepening personalization is both an interpersonal and a role-mediated process shaped by the institutional positioning of student staff roles. Japanese universities may therefore need to clarify student staff roles and support reciprocal contact as part of a more integrationist approach to internationalization at home.*

Keywords: personalization, intergroup contact, contact between domestic and international students, internationalization at home, student staff roles, social identity inclusiveness, deprovincialization.

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INTRODUCTION

Internationalization at home is commonly defined as the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (Beelen & Jones, 2015). A core premise of research on internationalization at home is that the mere presence of international students does not automatically produce intercultural learning; meaningful outcomes depend on sustained interaction (Harrison, 2015). This issue is particularly salient in Japan. Although the number of international students enrolled in Japanese higher education institutions reached a record 229,467 in 2024 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2025), numerical internationalization does not in itself ensure meaningful everyday relationships between Japanese and international students.

As campuses become more internationally diverse, Japanese and international students are increasingly likely to share classrooms, dormitories, and extracurricular spaces. However, everyday contact remains limited and uneven. Japanese students may continue to position international students as distant “international students” or “foreigners,” while international students may orient toward intracultural rather than intercultural contact (Taniguchi et al., 2022). Recent research in Japanese higher education also indicates that international students in Japan continue to face challenges related to loneliness, social engagement, and friendship formation (Ivanova et al., 2025). At the same time, intercultural interaction can shape both domestic and international students’ engagement, sense of belonging, and learning experiences in increasingly diverse academic environments (Egitim & Hooper, 2026). Yet these studies have

primarily focused on international students' social engagement or on intercultural interaction in classroom-based settings, leaving it unclear how Japanese students themselves come to understand international students through repeated everyday contact. Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on Japanese students in student staff roles who regularly interact with international students to examine how repeated contact shapes their understandings of international students. In this study, "international students" refers to foreign nationals enrolled as full-time students at Japanese universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Staff Roles and Repeated Contact with International Students

Student staff roles in Japanese higher education provide a particularly relevant context for examining repeated contact with international students. Teaching assistants (TAs), language assistants (LAs), and resident assistants (RAs) often interact repeatedly with international students in classrooms, language support settings, and mixed dormitories. For example, in classrooms, structured tasks involving international students can support Japanese students' international posture (Aubrey & Philpott, 2021). Beyond formal coursework, student-initiated activities appear more conducive to deeper intercultural relationships (Kudo et al., 2020). Similarly, long-term engagement in residential communities can gradually shift relationships from distant coexistence to closer interpersonal ties (Hasegawa & Shima, 2020). These studies suggest that repeated contact, especially when less structured, can foster closer interpersonal relationships and encourage Japanese students to see international students more as individuals rather than as category members.

At the same time, students in these roles who facilitate such contact between Japanese and international students often occupy structurally ambiguous positions between being peers and fulfilling staff-like responsibilities. For example, research on teaching assistants and language assistants suggests that their duties may exceed their formally defined roles and that their work may be shaped by unclear and conflicting expectations (Buckingham, 2018; Fatima & Rehman, 2012). Similar tensions appear in research on resident assistants, who are expected to build supportive relationships with residents while also upholding institutional rules, a dual demand that can generate role conflict and ambiguity (Cheng & Chan, 2021; Everett & Loftus, 2011).

Student staff roles can therefore create opportunities for more personal contact and shifts in how international students are understood, while the responsibilities attached to those roles may also limit how far such contact becomes personal, reciprocal, or peer-like.

Social Identity and Intergroup Contact Perspectives

Contact in student staff roles has a dual character. It may become personal and peer-like, yet it remains shaped by staff-like responsibilities and role boundaries. To interpret this dual character, the present study draws on social identity and self-categorization perspectives to examine how group boundaries and role identities become salient when contact occurs within student staff roles (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). These perspectives are relevant because they highlight how students in these roles may relate to international students as fellow students, classmates, or friends in some contexts, while remaining positioned by staff-like responsibilities and boundaries in others. Within this broader theoretical foundation, personalization is treated as the central interpretive concept for examining changes in how Japanese students in student staff roles understand international students through repeated contact. Personalization suggests that repeated contact involving self-disclosure can shift attention away from group labels and toward individuating information, such that international students come to be seen less as category members and more as particular individuals (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Ensari et al., 2012). As this process unfolds, research on perceived variability further indicates that contact can increase awareness of diversity within the category of “international students” and weaken more homogeneous representations of outgroups (Boin et al., 2021; Crisp & Hewstone, 1999). In university settings, repeated contact may heighten awareness of variation in personality, motivation, interests, and language use among international students, thereby weakening the tendency to view them as a single homogeneous group.

Beyond shifts from group labels to individuating information, contact that becomes more personal may also raise questions about how interpersonal closeness relates to broader ingroup–outgroup boundaries. This issue has been discussed through the concept of social identity inclusiveness. Van Dommelen et al. (2015) defined social identity inclusiveness as the extent to which people construe ingroup boundaries more inclusively across multiple and cross-cutting social memberships. Building on this framework, Branković et al. (2020) showed that contact can improve outgroup attitudes partly by fostering greater social identity inclusiveness. Reimer et al. (2022) further demonstrated that such inclusiveness concerns who is included in “us” and who is positioned as “not us,” indicating broader but still differentiated ingroup boundaries rather than a fully recategorized common ingroup. In university settings, through repeated contact, domestic students may develop greater interpersonal closeness and a broader sense of connection with international students, while still recognizing them as a distinct group.

A further issue is whether contact that becomes more personal not only changes how outgroup members are understood but also prompts reflection on ingroup norms and taken-for-granted assumptions. This dimension of contact has often been discussed through the concept of deprovincialization. Deprovincialization refers to a less ingroup-centric worldview in which people come to see their own norms, values, and ways of life as less natural or universally

shared, while also becoming more open to outgroups and their practices (Pettigrew, 1998; Verkuyten et al., 2022). Survey research suggests that deprovincialization is associated with more positive outgroup attitudes, greater support for multiculturalism, and greater recognition of the limitations of one's own ingroup (Schmid et al., 2012; Verkuyten et al., 2010). In university settings, repeated contact may lead domestic students to reflect on the norms and assumptions that shape their everyday academic and social lives and become more open to international students.

Rationale for the Study

The literature reviewed above establishes two relevant points. First, sustained contact between domestic and international students in classrooms, student-led activities, and residential settings can foster closer relationships and more individualized understandings of international students. Second, research on student staff roles suggests that such roles are often marked by ambiguity and role conflict because students may be expected to build supportive relationships while also maintaining fairness, boundaries, and, in some cases, monitoring or rule enforcement. Student staff roles in Japanese higher education therefore provide a particularly appropriate context for examining repeated contact with international students because they combine repeated opportunities for interaction with responsibilities attached to those roles.

However, previous research has not sufficiently connected these two lines of inquiry. Studies of contact between domestic and international students have not fully explained how Japanese students' understandings of international students change through repeated everyday contact, or why such changes may not lead uniformly to more reciprocal or peer-like relationships. Conversely, research on student staff roles has documented role ambiguity and role conflict, but has less often examined how such role conditions shape intergroup contact processes and domestic students' understandings of international students. Thus, it remains important to examine how repeated contact and the responsibilities associated with student staff roles intersect in Japanese students' understandings of international students.

To address this gap, the present study examines how Japanese students in student staff roles describe changes in their understandings of international students through repeated contact. It also examines how the responsibilities attached to student staff roles shape whether these changes become associated with peer-like reciprocal or staff-like role-based relationships. In doing so, the study extends previous scholarship by connecting research on contact between domestic and international students with research on student staff roles. Consistent with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), the study uses the theoretical perspectives reviewed above as sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2020) while inductively developing specific categories and relationships from participants' accounts. Accordingly, the study addresses the following questions:

- RQ1. How do Japanese students in student staff roles describe changes in their understandings of international students through repeated contact?
- RQ2. How do the responsibilities attached to student staff roles shape whether these changes become associated with peer-like reciprocal or staff-like role-based relationships?

METHOD

Design

This study employed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to examine how Japanese students in student staff roles made sense of their repeated contact with international students. Existing work on personalization (Ensari et al., 2012), social identity inclusiveness (Van Dommelen et al., 2015), and deprovincialization (Pettigrew, 1998; Verkuyten et al., 2022) served as sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2020), but not as predetermined coding categories; themes and relationships were developed inductively from participants' accounts. The resulting model is therefore informed by, but not determined by, these lines of research.

Participants

This study focused on Japanese students employed by universities in student staff roles requiring regular interaction with international students. Participants were recruited from three medium-sized universities in urban Japan and included TAs in courses with international students, LAs providing out-of-class Japanese and conversation support, and RAs in mixed domestic–international dormitories. All participants were native speakers of Japanese and had at least one year of experience in student staff roles, with most having between one and two years of experience. This was considered sufficient to capture repeated contact with international students over time. One participant was administratively classified as an international student but treated as a Japanese student in the analysis because they were a native speaker of Japanese and self-identified as Japanese. Overseas experience was recorded as background information but was not treated as a primary analytic dimension because it did not align clearly with the process identified in the analysis. Further demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 21)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	14	67
Male	7	33
Age range		
20–29 years	21	100
Academic status		
Undergraduate students	18	86
Graduate students	3	14
Main student staff role		
Teaching Assistant (TA)	5	24
Language Assistant (LA)	9	43
Resident Assistant (RA)	7	33
Length of experience in student staff roles		
1 to < 2 years	16	76
2 to < 3 years	3	14
3 years or more	2	10
Overseas sojourn experience		
Extended sojourns, study abroad, or international	11	52
None or short trips	10	48

Data Collection

The first author collaborated with international offices at the three participating universities and, where appropriate, drew on existing professional and informal student networks to invite participants. Participants were approached by email or in person. Recruitment and interviewing proceeded in two waves. The first wave, conducted between June 2019 and February 2020, included 12 participants and generated initial categories. Because the study focused on repeated, everyday face-to-face contact with international students, additional sampling was not conducted while COVID-19 substantially disrupted campus-based interaction and international student mobility. The second wave, conducted between May and August 2025, included 9 participants and was undertaken after opportunities for such contact had been gradually re-established on Japanese campuses, allowing students to accumulate face-to-face contact experience again. The second wave was used to elaborate and refine the emerging categories, not to conduct a pre/post-pandemic comparison. Prior to each interview, participants received an explanation of the study and provided written informed consent, including permission to audio-record the interviews. This study was approved by the Nagoya University Institutional Review Board (Approval ID: 191270).

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted in Japanese, either face-to-face or online according to participants' preferences, and lasted 60–90 minutes. Participants were asked about everyday interactions with international students in classrooms, out-of-class activities, and dormitories, including

successful and challenging encounters, perceived changes, and factors facilitating or constraining relationship-building. Follow-up probes addressed interactional processes, shifts in understanding, and role-based constraints. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Coding and Constant Comparison

Guided by grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2014), the analysis proceeded through initial, focused, and theoretical coding. In the initial coding phase, the first author read the transcripts line by line and labeled meaningful segments to remain close to participants' meanings and words. In the focused coding phase, the most analytically significant and recurrent codes were grouped into higher-order themes across participants. In the theoretical coding phase, relationships among these themes were examined to develop an interpretive model of deepening personalization grounded in participants' narratives.

Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively. As analysis developed, later interviews were used to elaborate, refine, and assess the emerging categories and the developing model. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was used within and across interviews, including comparisons by interview wave during focused and theoretical coding. Wave-specific differences did not generate a separate category central to the model. Memos were written to document emerging ideas, questions, and analytic decisions, as well as to examine how prior assumptions may have shaped interpretation. Analysis continued until theoretical sufficiency was reached; that is, the categories were sufficiently developed across cases to support an interpretive model of the process identified in participants' accounts.

Coding and theme development were led by the first author, with the second author providing ongoing analytic consultation. To enhance trustworthiness, both authors regularly reviewed codes, theme boundaries, and alternative interpretations and refined them through discussion and consensus. After theme development, both authors reviewed the organization of participants' accounts in Table 2, which summarizes case-based variation in personalization and relational orientation rather than presenting a formal typology.

Transcripts were analyzed in Japanese. For reporting, Japanese excerpts were translated into English by the first author and, where feasible, reviewed by the second author to help retain participants' intended meanings.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Both authors are Japanese researchers with bilingual competence and extensive research and professional experience in social psychology, international education, and international student exchange, including substantial experience outside Japan. These backgrounds provided familiarity with the study context, while also requiring reflexive attention to how the authors' assumptions might

shape the interpretation of participants' accounts. To address this issue, the authors used analytic memos, discussed alternative interpretations, and examined contrasting cases.

RESULTS

Three themes emerged from the analysis: a perspective shift toward individuality and diversity among international students, an inclusive understanding of international students, and a reappraisal of Japanese norms and openness toward international students. Participant quotations are identified by anonymized numeric identifiers (P1–P21).

Perspective Shift toward Individuality and Diversity among International Students

The first theme was a perspective shift toward individuality and diversity among international students. Participants described moving from seeing “international students” as a single category to seeing them as individual people. As their engagement became more personal, they also began to recognize variation within labels such as “Chinese,” “American,” and “international student.”

All 21 participants described some form of this person-centered shift. One participant explained, “I look at the person, not their nationality. I don’t think, ‘they’re from X, so they must be like this.’ ... This person is this person” (P12). While four participants reported that they had already held this perspective, usually because of prior overseas or multicultural experience, 17 described developing it through repeated interaction with international students in their student staff roles. These roles provided routine one-on-one contact and check-ins that helped them develop and sustain this view over time. One RA explained:

With dorm residents, I hold one-on-one meetings and casual check-ins to understand their personalities. Talking and reaching out, I ask about hobbies and focus on individuality. Nationality or culture mattered less, and person-to-person engagement showed me how diverse people are.
(P14)

These role-based routines provided repeated opportunities for participants to develop and sustain a more person-centered perspective.

As repeated contact became more personal, 14 of the 21 participants explicitly described becoming more aware of variation among international students. One participant explained:

My Chinese and American roommates had completely different personalities. One Chinese friend was very quiet, and one American friend was into Japanese culture and studying Japanese, so I told myself not to rely on stereotypes when interacting with international students.
(P9)

Similar patterns appeared with broader regional labels. One participant noted:

As I learned more about the traditions of Southeast Asian countries and had direct contact with people from the region, I stopped seeing Southeast Asia as just one broad category and started to think more concretely about countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia. (P1)

These accounts show that participants moved beyond seeing international students as a single group and came to recognize individuality and diversity among them. This deepened their understanding of international students and was closely connected to the more inclusive sense of “us” described in the next theme.

Inclusive Understanding of International Students

The second theme was an inclusive understanding of international students. Building on Theme 1, in which participants came to see international students as distinct individuals with diverse backgrounds, participants described recognizing common ground with them in everyday interaction and experiencing greater familiarity and psychological closeness with them rather than seeing them as distant outsiders.

Sixteen of the 21 participants described experiences consistent with this theme. Participants described finding common ground through everyday interaction, including shared classes, hobbies, meals, and everyday concerns. One participant noted, “I came to see that, although our backgrounds were different, we still shared common ground in our interests and preferences” (P2). Another participant noted, “When I opened up about my own worries, I found that international students sometimes had the same kinds of worries too” (P6). These accounts suggest that recognizing common ground often served as a basis for reduced psychological distance and greater familiarity.

More specifically, 10 of the 21 participants explicitly described coming to see international students as familiar individuals rather than distant outsiders. Through shared interests, concerns, and experiences, they increasingly came to feel greater familiarity and reduced psychological distance. One participant noted, “I realized international students are not from another world. We take the same classes, and I felt a sense of closeness” (P3). Another participant noted,

There was a Nepali student who was really devout, and she told me a lot about Nepali culture and religion. In the end, intercultural understanding felt less about differences and more about noticing similarities. Those common points connected across personality, studies, and hobbies, and our conversations and relationship grew. (P8)

For some, however, this shift was not immediate. Several participants described initial friction or uncertainty before a sense of common ground and familiarity began to develop. One participant recalled:

At first I was pretty angry when an international student from Uzbekistan bluntly told me, ‘That’s wrong’ ... then I realized my common sense isn’t everyone’s. ... Through spending time together outside work, I got to know his personality and came to like everyone. (P17)

These accounts suggest that participants came to perceive international students as familiar individuals with whom they shared meaningful common ground. Participants' interpretive frameworks thus became more flexible and relational, a shift closely connected to the next theme.

Reappraisal of Japanese Norms and Openness toward International Students

The third theme was a reappraisal of Japanese norms and openness toward international students. Of the 21 participants, 18 described this reappraisal, which involved reconsidering Japanese norms and assumptions about engaging with international students. Among these 18 participants, differences emerged in how they positioned themselves toward international students in relation to their student staff roles. The remaining three participants did not describe such reappraisal and are discussed later as contrasting cases.

Reappraising Japanese Norms and Assumptions

Among these 18 participants, prior assumptions shifted as relationships deepened. This often involved decentering nationality, shifting from culture-first assumptions to more person-centered understandings, and rethinking Japanese norms and assumptions about engaging with international students. One participant explained:

Culture can create assumptions and expectations, and interactions can break down, leading to distrust or even a sense of betrayal. ... Rather than trying to understand the culture first, I try to understand each person. Understanding the person helps me understand the culture, not the other way around. (P6)

Another participant similarly noted:

At first I hadn't really talked with people from Nepal and felt a bit wary; after we became friends, I could talk with them casually. ... I no longer treat people as their country and have stopped asking where someone is from. I remember people by individual details rather than by their country. (P8)

These accounts suggest that participants moved away from nationality-based assumptions and toward more person-centered understandings.

In addition, participants reconsidered what they had taken as "natural" in intercultural interaction and became more open and flexible toward international students. One participant explained:

I came to think it is important to adjust how I speak Japanese to each individual. ... I do not change my attitude based on whether someone is an international or Japanese student. ... What I learned most is that

intercultural exchange does not have to be in English. Interacting in Japanese can be a first step toward intercultural exchange. (P5)

Another participant noted:

I try to choose topics everyone can join, for example switching from anime to what to do over the summer, and I bring in anyone who is falling behind in the conversation. If someone speaks to me in Japanese, I respond in Japanese; if in English, in English. (P7)

These accounts show openness in person-specific language use, non-differential treatment, inclusive topic selection, and flexible interaction. Yet within this shared reappraisal, participants differed in how they positioned themselves toward international students.

Self-Positioning within Student Staff Roles

Among these 18 participants, self-positioning varied depending on how they understood their student staff roles. Eleven engaged with international students both in their staff roles and as peers or friends, adopting a more peer-like orientation. One participant described this shift clearly:

At first I saw myself as someone who had to look after international students. With sustained contact, I began to relate to them as equals. Rather than “taking care of” them, I felt respect for their learning in a different culture and realized how much I could learn. Our relationship became more peer-like. As the years went by, this stance endured, and the relationship continued beyond Japan as friends of the same generation. As a first-year I planned everything, but by my third and fourth year I would ask international students to run language tables, engaging as friends with equal abilities. (P9)

This account shows a shift toward a more reciprocal stance.

The other seven participants described person-centered understandings of international students but adopted a more staff-like orientation and maintained a more asymmetrical stance. One participant explained:

As a TA, I try to maintain clear boundaries regardless of whether students are domestic or international. Even if we interact in a friendly way, the rules of the TA role still have to be respected, and I make sure not to show favoritism. (P19)

This account suggests that person-centered understandings did not necessarily lead to peer-like reciprocal relationships, as role responsibilities were associated with more asymmetrical, staff-like role-based relationships.

The remaining three participants did not describe such reappraisal. Two emphasized equal and friendly treatment but kept contact superficial, reflecting a relatively peer-like orientation without deepened personalization. As one participant explained, “I live in a residence hall as an RA and share the kitchen

with international students, so I see them every day, but I don't really interact with them" (P20). The other participant focused mainly on rule enforcement and distance, reflecting a staff-like orientation without deepened personalization. As this participant stated, "I basically follow the dorm manual when I warn students and just make them follow our rules" (P10).

Across the 18 cases that described this reappraisal, relational orientation was associated mainly with whether participants positioned themselves more as peers or as staff, rather than with whether they recognized international students as individuals.

Table 2 summarizes case-level variation in personalization and relational orientation. The 18 cases that described this reappraisal are treated as high-personalization cases, whereas the remaining three are presented as low-personalization contrasting cases. These distinctions were made through whole-case interpretation, based on each participant's account across the three themes and on their relational positioning. High personalization denotes developed person-centered understandings and reappraisal beyond superficial contact; low personalization denotes superficial, category-based, or role-limited accounts. Peer-like orientation denotes reciprocity, equality, friendship, or voluntary interaction; staff-like orientation denotes fairness, boundary maintenance, monitoring, or role responsibilities. On this basis, the high-personalization cases are treated as the primary patterns identified in the analysis, whereas the low-personalization cases clarify the boundary conditions of the primary process of deepening personalization.

Table 2: Patterns of Personalization and Relational Orientation

Personal ization	Relational orientation	n	Brief characterization	Illustrative quotes (participant)
High	Peer-like	11	Person-centered understandings with peer-like reciprocal relationships.	"After we talked a few times in a small group, international students began to feel more like friends." (P3, LA) "I interacted with the residents naturally, and even now international students tell me I don't seem like an RA." (P14, RA)

High	Staff-like	7	Person-centered understandings with staff-like role-based relationships.	<p>“I always put students first, but I also see being a TA as a professional role, so even when it is hard, I try not to bring in my personal feelings.” (P15, TA)</p> <p>“If I became closer to some international students than others, I would probably talk mainly to them, so I try to maintain an equal environment.” (P4, LA)</p>
Low	Peer-like	2	Equal but superficial contact with limited personalization.	<p>“I live in a residence hall as an RA and share the kitchen with international students, so I see them every day, but I don’t really interact with them.” (P20, RA)</p>
Low	Staff-like	1	Rule-focused engagement with distance and limited personalization.	<p>“I basically follow the dorm manual when I warn students and just make them follow our rules.” (P10, RA)</p>

Note. TA = teaching assistant; LA = language assistant; RA = resident assistant.

Summary of Results by Research Question

The key findings are summarized by research question.

RQ1:

- (a) Participants moved from category-based understandings of “international students” to individualized understandings and greater recognition of diversity within this category.
- (b) Participants identified common ground with international students and came to experience greater familiarity and psychological closeness with them.
- (c) Participants reappraised Japanese norms and assumptions about engaging with international students and became more open toward them.

RQ2:

Participants’ changing understandings of international students were associated with two relational orientations: peer-like reciprocal relationships when they positioned themselves more as peers, and staff-like role-based relationships when they positioned themselves more as staff and role responsibilities were salient.

DISCUSSION

Personalization through Repeated Contact

Regarding RQ1, the findings suggest that one prominent change was a shift away from viewing “international students” as a single homogeneous category and toward seeing them as particular people with different personalities, interests, and ways of engaging. This pattern is consistent with research on personalization, which argues that repeated contact involving self-disclosure can draw attention away from group labels and toward individuating information (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Ensari et al., 2012). It also resonates with research on perceived variability, which suggests that contact can heighten awareness of diversity within an outgroup and weaken more homogeneous representations of that group (Boin et al., 2021; Crisp & Hewstone, 1999). The present findings extend this literature by suggesting that person-centered shifts and increased awareness of diversity were closely intertwined. Rather than relying on nationality alone as the primary basis for understanding others, participants came to consider personality, interests, and ways of engaging alongside nationality, thereby developing a more layered understanding of international students as particular people. In this sense, repeated contact was closely connected to common ground, familiarity, psychological closeness, and a broader but still differentiated sense of connection.

In addition, the findings suggest that participants identified shared interests, concerns, and experiences with international students and, through these shared points of connection, came to experience greater familiarity and psychological closeness with them. This pattern can be interpreted through the concept of social identity inclusiveness, defined as the extent to which people construe ingroup boundaries more inclusively across multiple and cross-cutting social memberships (Van Dommelen et al., 2015). Previous research has shown that contact can broaden the subjective boundaries of “us” by fostering greater social identity inclusiveness (Branković et al., 2020), and that such inclusiveness concerns who is included in “us” while still being seen as members of a distinct group (Reimer et al., 2022). The present findings suggest that recognizing common ground through shared interests, concerns, and experiences helped reduce psychological distance between participants and international students and increase participants’ sense of familiarity with them. This, in turn, created opportunities for participants to reposition international students within a broader sense of “us,” while still seeing them as members of a distinct group. This inclusive understanding did not emerge immediately or automatically, but developed through everyday interaction and, in some cases, through relational experiences that included initial friction or uncertainty.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that participants developed more reflexive and person-centered understandings, reconsidered Japanese norms and taken-for-granted assumptions, and became more open and flexible toward international students. This pattern is consistent with the concept of deprovincialization, which can be understood here as the reappraisal of ingroup norms and a more open and flexible attitude toward outgroups (Pettigrew, 1998; Verkuyten et al., 2022).

Survey research further suggests that deprovincialization is associated with more positive outgroup attitudes, greater support for multiculturalism, and greater recognition of the limitations of one's own ingroup (Schmid et al., 2012; Verkuyten et al., 2010). The present findings extend this line of argument by showing that, as participants experienced greater familiarity and psychological closeness with international students, they developed more person-centered understandings, questioned culture-based assumptions, and reconsidered what they had previously taken as "natural" in intercultural interaction. On this basis, they described more open and flexible ways of engaging with international students, including person-specific language use, non-differential treatment, inclusive topic selection, and adaptive interaction.

Overall, the findings for RQ1 indicate that repeated contact was associated with a patterned process of personalization in participants' understandings of international students, involving movement from more category-based views toward more individualized and differentiated understandings, a more inclusive understanding, and the reappraisal of Japanese norms and taken-for-granted assumptions.

Self-Positioning within Student Staff Roles: Peer-Like or Staff-Like Orientations

Regarding RQ2, the findings suggest that changes in participants' understandings of international students did not lead to a single relational orientation. Even when participants came to understand international students as individuals and, in many cases, as familiar individuals, some moved toward peer-like reciprocal relationships, whereas others maintained more asymmetrical, staff-like role-based relationships.

This difference can be interpreted through social identity and self-categorization theory, which suggests that people can define themselves and others in terms of different group memberships and role identities, and that particular role boundaries may become more or less salient depending on context (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). In the present study, the relevant distinction was not only whether participants understood international students as individuals, but also whether they positioned themselves in more peer-like or more staff-like terms in relation to them. Thus, relational orientations emerged through the intersection of changing views of international students and participants' self-positioning within student staff roles.

This pattern can also be understood in relation to prior research on role ambiguity and role conflict in student staff roles. Earlier work on teaching assistants, language assistants, and resident assistants has shown that such positions often place students in structurally ambiguous locations between being peers and fulfilling staff-like responsibilities (Buckingham, 2018; Cheng & Chan, 2021; Everett & Loftus, 2011; Fatima & Rehman, 2012). The present findings extend this literature by showing that such ambiguity affects not only role difficulties but also the relational orientations of contact. Where interaction became more mutual, self-disclosing, and less tightly bound to institutional

obligations, participants tended to move toward peer-like reciprocal relationships. By contrast, where fairness, non-favoritism, monitoring, or professional accountability remained highly salient, participants tended to maintain staff-like role boundaries even while still recognizing international students as individuals. In this sense, the relational consequences of repeated contact were shaped not only by the frequency of interaction, but also by how participants were institutionally positioned within student staff roles and what forms of relationship were enabled or constrained.

Overall, the findings for RQ2 suggest that the intersection between changing views of international students and self-positioning within student staff roles was shaped by the institutional positioning of student staff roles. This has implications for intergroup contact research in higher education. The present findings caution against assuming that more individualized or positive understandings will necessarily lead to more peer-like reciprocal relationships. Instead, they suggest that micro-level interactional developments were shaped by the responsibilities attached to student staff roles and cannot be understood independently of the meso-level institutional arrangements that shape those responsibilities.

Model of Deepening Personalization through Repeated Contact

The findings for RQ1 and RQ2 suggest that, in participants' accounts, repeated contact with international students appeared to foster a deepening process of personalization in how they understood international students, extending from category-based views toward individualized and differentiated understandings, inclusive understanding, and reappraisal of Japanese norms and assumptions. At the same time, these changes were associated with different relational orientations, shaped by participants' self-positioning within student staff roles and the responsibilities attached to those roles, with more peer-like reciprocal relationships in some cases and more staff-like role-based relationships in others. Figure 1 illustrates a model of deepening personalization through repeated contact, grounded in participants' retrospective accounts rather than a fixed stage sequence.

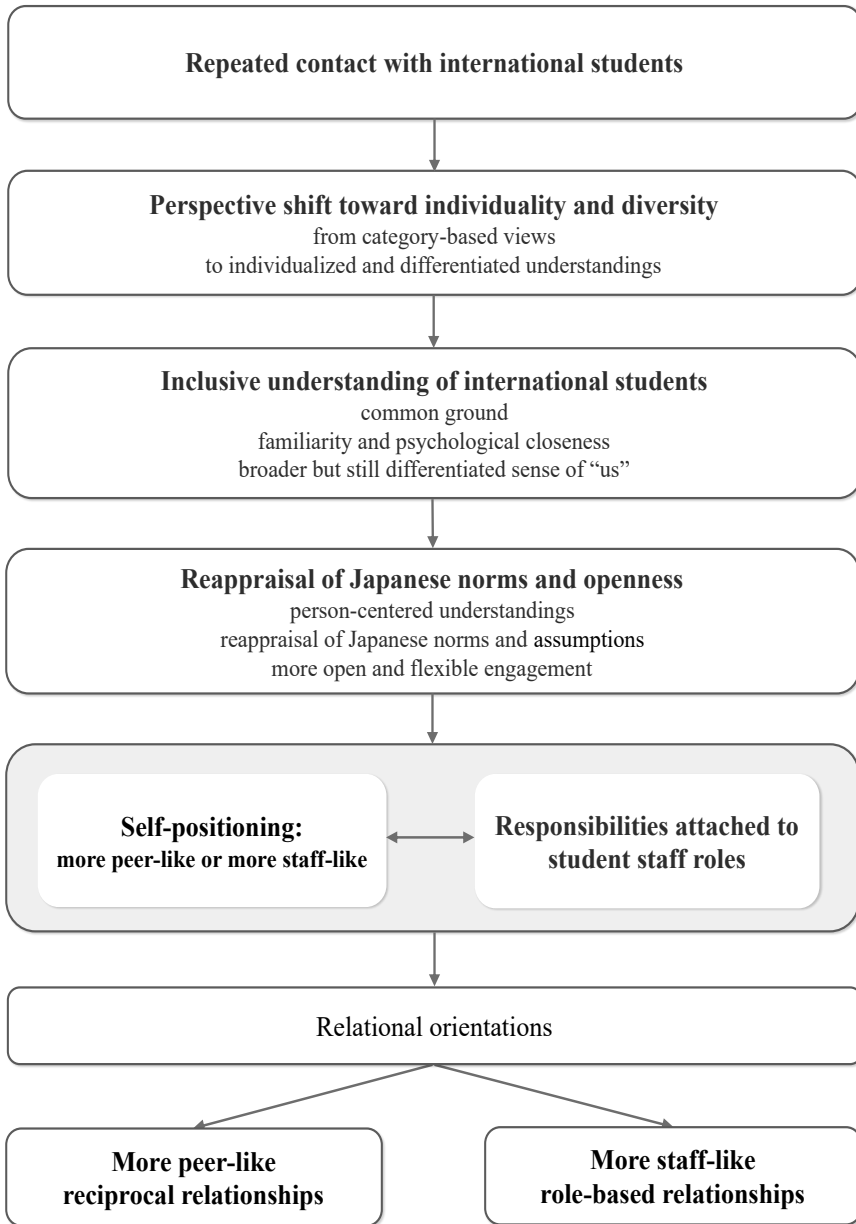


Figure 1: Model of Deepening Personalization through Repeated Contact

Note. The model represents a patterned tendency in participants' accounts rather than a fixed stage sequence.

Toward Integrationism for Internationalization at Home in Japanese Universities

The model of deepening personalization through repeated contact connects research on contact between domestic and international students with research on student staff roles. Its central contribution is to show that deepening personalization is not only an interpersonal shift in understanding but also a role-mediated process shaped by how students in student staff roles are institutionally positioned.

In relation to personalization research, the model shows that repeated contact may deepen participants' understandings beyond individuation toward diversity recognition, common ground, familiarity and psychological closeness, and reappraisal of Japanese norms and assumptions (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Ensari et al., 2012). It also extends research on role ambiguity and role conflict by showing that ambiguity between peer and staff roles shaped not only role difficulties but also relational orientations, as participants positioned themselves in more peer-like or more staff-like terms (Buckingham, 2018; Everett & Loftus, 2011; Turner et al., 1987).

The model also contributes to research on contact between domestic and international students in Japanese higher education and to internationalization at home scholarship. While internationalization at home research emphasizes that meaningful outcomes require sustained interaction rather than mere co-presence (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Harrison, 2015), studies in Japanese higher education show that such contact remains uneven, with continuing challenges around relational engagement and belonging (Egitim & Hooper, 2026; Ivanova et al., 2025; Taniguchi et al., 2022). The model extends this literature by showing why repeated contact with international students matters for Japanese students in student staff roles: it may foster broader social inclusion, reduce psychological distance, and prompt reappraisal of ingroup assumptions. At the same time, such contact does not automatically produce friendship-like relationships or meaningful internationalization at home; its effects depend on how contact is organized and institutionally positioned.

Importantly, these micro-level contact processes are shaped by the meso-level institutional arrangements of student staff roles. If Japanese and international students encounter one another primarily through narrowly defined support relationships, role-bound contact may reinforce on-campus separation by sustaining distinctions between support providers and recipients. Conversely, more peer-like reciprocal relationships may contribute to broader integration between Japanese and international students on campus over time.

Accordingly, this study argues for *integrationism* as a guiding principle for internationalization at home in Japanese universities (Ebuchi, 1997; Takai, 1995), in which Japanese and international students are treated as part of a single student body across academic and everyday campus life. From this perspective, a first practical step for universities is to clarify student staff roles. Universities should define role purposes and boundaries, distinguish peer-support from monitoring or disciplinary responsibilities, and provide training and supervision that encourage

reciprocal and person-centered interaction. Such measures may help student staff roles serve as infrastructure for reciprocal contact between Japanese and international students.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the model of deepening personalization is based on retrospective interviews with 21 Japanese TAs, LAs, and RAs and therefore offers an interpretive account of the personalization process rather than a direct account of how that process unfolded over time. Second, the model is based only on participants' perspectives and cannot determine whether Japanese students outside student staff roles or international students would describe a similar process. The positive relational developments described here may partly reflect self-selection among students who chose roles involving regular contact with international students, and the model should be interpreted with attention to structural asymmetries and institutional expectations that may shape what forms of personalization become possible or constrained. Third, because the study is grounded in Japanese higher education and draws on participants from three medium-sized universities with substantial intercultural engagement, the personalization process may differ across settings, program types, and student populations. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal, comparative, and quantitative designs and examine when and for whom contact is associated with deepening personalization, as well as how role expectations and power asymmetries shape its relational consequences.

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