

Journal of International Students
Volume 15, Issue 5 (2025), pp. 97-116
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32674/8w93vt76>



Exploring the Intrinsic Dimensions of Study Abroad Aspirations: The Case of Vietnamese International Students in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on aspirations to study abroad, using the case of Vietnamese international students (VISs) in Japan. A qualitative research study based on 23 in-depth interviews applied the 'aspirations-capabilities' framework (de Haas, 2021) and revealed that while economic factors play a significant role in motivating Vietnamese students to study abroad, the 'intrinsic' dimension of migration aspirations, such as personal well-being and the desire to live abroad, also heavily influences their aspirations. They initially prioritize practical benefits, which can overshadow the importance of intrinsic values. However, it is crucial to consider both the instrumental and intrinsic dimensions, as they often overlap and cannot be separated. Ignoring the intrinsic dimension would overlook the complexity of the reasons behind VIS aspirations. Focusing on the case of VIS in Japan, this study contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of why they study abroad.

Keywords: migration aspirations, intrinsic aspirations, Vietnamese international students, Japan

Outbound Vietnamese student mobility has increased significantly since the early 21st century (Hong Nguyen, 2013). Driven by economic development, population growth, and an insufficient domestic higher education system, many Vietnamese students seek international education to enhance their career prospects and personal development (Le Huu Nghia, 2019). This trend has positioned Vietnam as one of the top contributors to global student mobility (Nam & Cheng-Hai, 2021). Among destination countries, Japan hosts the largest number of Vietnamese international students (VISs) (UNESCO, 2023), accounting for 33.3% of total VIS enrollments worldwide.

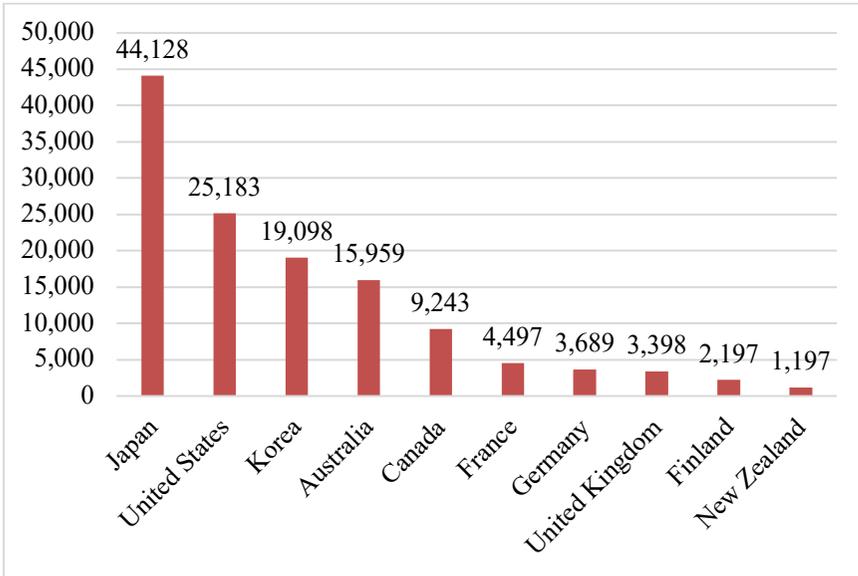


Figure 1: Number of Outbound Vietnamese Students by Host Countries (2022)

Note. Created by the author on the basis of data from “*Education: Outbound Internationally Mobile Students by Host Region.*” UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023.

The literature often links Vietnamese students’ decisions to study in Japan to potential future economic benefits, such as career advancement and higher salaries (Sato, 2021). However, migration research increasingly recognizes that students’ aspirations are multidimensional, involving both ‘instrumental’¹ and ‘intrinsic’² aspirations (de Haas, 2020, p. 62). While intrinsic aspirations, such as the desire for self-improvement, cultural experiences, seeking challenges, and enhancing social status, have been explored in international student mobility research on Asian students (Consoli, 2024; Nyamsuren et al., 2024; Jiao, 2025) and European students (Hennings & Tanabe, 2018; Mammadova & Allen, 2024; Murphy-Lejeune, 2001), studies focusing on the VIS in Japan have predominantly emphasized economic incentives. Additionally, qualitative studies that focus on unique sociocultural factors and personal characteristics based on individual narratives to document lived experiences are still limited. Overcoming such conceptual and methodological limitations can contribute to a more holistic understanding of VIS migration patterns.

This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the complex motivations behind VISS’ decision to study in Japan, with a particular focus on intrinsic

¹ Refers to migration as a functional mean to achieve ends, for instance, better healthcare, or education (de Haas, 2020, p. 62).

² Relates to the joy and pleasure derived from the migration experience itself, such as exploring new societies or seeing the vibrant city lights (de Haas, 2020, p. 62).

aspirations. It also examines the interplay between intrinsic and instrumental factors in shaping their study abroad decisions. The study uses qualitative data to investigate how these motivations interact with and influence Vietnamese students' mobility choices and particularly focuses on sociocultural factors and personal factors from individuals' narratives. Gaining insight into the multifaceted motivations of these students is essential for a more comprehensive perspective on their study-abroad aspirations. The findings contribute to the literature on migration and international education while offering policy insights for Japan to enhance its ability to attract and retain international students.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews the study abroad aspirations of VISs who study in Japan. The third section outlines the research design and analysis methods. The fourth section presents the results and discusses VIS's study aspirations. The final section concludes the paper and suggests policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instrumental aspirations

Previous studies on aspirations abroad, particularly in Vietnamese students in Japan, often utilize established migration theory frameworks, such as push-pull models (Le Huu Nghia, 2019), migrant network theory (Moon & Shin, 2019), or Bourdieu's capital and habitus theory (L. T. Tran, 2016). These frameworks emphasize economic returns, focusing on how studying abroad enhances employability and income potential.

For many Vietnamese students, studying abroad is a strategic choice for accessing high-quality education and securing employment (Nguyen, 2022). The Vietnamese job market remains highly competitive (Trang et al., 2024), with employers favoring candidates possessing international experience, foreign language proficiency, work experience, and other desirable skills, such as continuous self-learning, resilience, adaptability, devotion and empathy (Le Huu Nghia, 2019; L. T. Tran et al., 2024). Moreover, the domestic higher education system has been criticized for its inability to meet the evolving demands of the global labor market (T. T. Tran, 2015). As a result, many VISs pursue international education as a means to increase their employability and career prospects.

The increasing number of Vietnamese students studying abroad has also influenced parental attitudes, leading older generations to actively support their children's overseas education (Thi et al., 2023). This highlights that the decision to study abroad is often shaped not only by individual aspirations but also by family expectations. Although one study in the European context revealed that students who engage in study mobility are 50 percent less likely to suffer long-term unemployment than others are (Golob & Makarovič, 2018), they are better equipped with transversal skills such as language competencies, problem-solving, and intercultural understanding, which could be used to secure their future employment opportunities. Thus, international student mobility should be

analyzed as both an individual investment and a familial investment, where human capital is acquired and leveraged for future economic returns (Alves et al., 2023).

The relationship between Japanese companies and VIS aspirations has also been explored. Liu-Farrer and Tran A.H. (2019) noted that the number of Japanese-affiliated companies in Vietnam has risen, attracting Vietnamese students seeking employment in these firms. The 2020 JETRO survey indicates that over 1,800 Japanese-affiliated companies operate in Vietnam. This growing investment has fostered increasing interest among Vietnamese students in studying Japanese language and culture as a means to secure employment in Japan or within Japanese companies in Vietnam (Hashimoto, 2022; Huynh & Vo, 2023).

Moreover, Japan's policy permitting international students to work up to 28 hours per week has contributed to making Japan an attractive study destination (Choudaha, 2017; Li et al., 2025; Sato, 2021). Initially, introduced to mitigate labor shortages, this policy provides VISs with opportunities to finance their living expenses while studying (Debnar, 2020). For some, part-time work serves as a primary source of income, and in certain cases, remittances are sent back home (Mazumi, 2023). The ability to work while studying has thus become a key motivational factor in Vietnamese students' decision to study in Japan.

Finally, for many VISs, international education serves as a gateway to permanent employment abroad (Liu-Farrer, 2020). Japan's shrinking population has prompted discussions on immigration policy, indirectly creating pathways for international students to transition into the workforce upon graduation (Sato, 2021). Given the relatively higher salaries in Japan than in Vietnam, many students perceive studying in Japan as a means to secure long-term economic stability.

Intrinsic aspirations

Despite the strong emphasis on economic incentives, recent research highlights the role of intrinsic aspirations in student mobility. Murphy-Lejeune (2001) introduced the concept of 'living foreignness'—the exploration and experimentation of life abroad—as a key motivation for European students. In particular, those “with no or very little Japanese language ability would want to experience Japan and understand its culture and society” rather than focusing solely on academic subjects (Hennings & Tanabe, 2018, p. 1918).

Similar trends have been observed among Asian students, who pursue independence, self-awareness, and new life experiences (Lin et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Nyamsuren et al., 2024; Consoli, 2024). For many Chinese students, the expectation of living in a clean, convenient, and natural environment plays a significant role in their decision-making processes (Jiao, 2025). Additionally, many Chinese and Korean students seek relief from pressures in their home countries, which also influences their motivations (Kim & Zhang, 2022).

In the case of Vietnamese students, dissatisfaction with local educational opportunities and sociopolitical conditions serves as a substantial motivation for studying abroad (Le Huu Nghia, 2019). Furthermore, self-enrichment and

personal development are crucial motivations, especially for those pursuing advanced degrees in countries such as New Zealand, the United States, China, Australia, Denmark, or the Philippines (Huong & Cong, 2018; Phan, 2023a, 2023b).

Despite the increasing recognition of intrinsic aspirations in international student mobility, these motivations have not been adequately examined in the case of VIS in Japan. Additionally, the unique sociocultural factors shaping these aspirations, such as educational pressure and gender norms, remain understudied.

From a methodological perspective, most existing research relies on quantitative data, which capture broad trends but overlook the depth of individual experiences. This study, therefore, employs a qualitative approach to document lived experiences and explore both instrumental and intrinsic dimensions of study-abroad aspirations among VISs in Japan. By centering students' narratives, this research provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of their motivations beyond economic factors.

Furthermore, insights from this study can inform policies aimed at enhancing the study abroad experience and retention rates of VIS in Japan. A deeper understanding of both instrumental and intrinsic aspirations can help educational institutions and policymakers develop targeted support systems, ultimately improving the overall mobility experience for VIS in Japan.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building on research on youth mobility, which highlights the role of intrinsic aspirations in migration decisions (Jiao, 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Consoli, 2024), this study employs the 'aspirations-capabilities' framework (de Haas, 2021). This framework distinguishes between 'instrumental' (a means to an end) and 'intrinsic' (well-being enhancing) motivations to explore the interplay of these factors in VISs' study-abroad aspirations.

De Haas et al. (2020) argued that the aspiration to move abroad is hardly ever a simple individual action in which a person decides to move in search of 'economic' achievement. Instead, the decision to migrate stems from social, economic, and political changes, which impact entire communities and societies in origin and destination areas (p. 42). In particular, when the chances of accessing education and information, social capital, and financial resources increase, this may change people's notion of a good life and typically increase their aspirations to go (de Haas, 2021). This repeatedly affects and alters personal aspirations, in which the aspirations consist of not only economic or instrumental aspirations but also noneconomic or intrinsic aspirations to migrate (de Haas, 2020, p. 62).

By applying this framework to study abroad decisions among VISs, this study examines their aspirations to study in Japan, with a particular focus on intrinsic motivations. By doing so, it aims to provide a more holistic understanding of their mobility trends, bridging existing gaps in research on Vietnamese student mobility.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative methodology that enables a comprehensive exploration of students' subjective experiences. The epistemological stance is interpretivism, which seeks to understand reality through participants' perspectives. This approach is particularly suitable for studying migration aspirations because it captures the subjective meanings and motivations behind students' decisions (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). According to this method, migration aspirations are influenced by social constructions and are contextually dependent.

Sampling and Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through 23 semistructured in-depth interviews conducted in September 2022, February 2023, and March 2023. The participant selection criteria included (1) current or former students at universities, vocational schools, or Japanese-language schools in Japan; (2) at least one year of experience studying and living in Japan; and (3) diverse ages, genders, and educational backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive range of perspectives. A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit participants, beginning with Vietnamese students at educational institutions in Japan. The interviews were conducted either in person or online, with the informed consent of the participants. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes, ensuring sufficient depth while maintaining participants' engagement.

The interviewees were mostly in their 20 s and 30 s, with 11 men and 12 women. Among them, 12 interviewees had completed university (undergraduate) education in Vietnam, 8 had completed high school, 1 had completed graduate school, 1 had completed vocational school, and 1 had completed junior college. In Japan, the highest level of education achieved by the interviewees was vocational school (12 individuals), followed by undergraduate studies at a university (6) and Japanese language school (5). Notably, the participants in this study are typically middle-class families who have the financial means to afford their education overseas. This suggests that their study abroad aspirations are not influenced primarily by their socioeconomic background.

The participants were asked about their experiences that influenced their decision to migrate to Japan to study, their tentative migration plans, their transnational connections, the sources of information that they received about life in Japan, their personal views on the home/host country's future development and whether their future life expectations were met. The interviews were conducted in Japan and Vietnam. All the conversations were audio-recorded in Vietnamese, transcribed, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Supplementary field notes and observational data were also collected to enhance contextual understanding. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were referred to by pseudonyms.

Table 1: Summary of Intrinsic and Instrumental Aspirations of VISs in Japan

Aspiration Type	Supporting Quotes
Intrinsic Aspirations	
'Living abroad' for cultural exploration	"I don't have a clear reason why I like Japan. I don't like Korea; I don't like K-pop. I feel Japan is more 'gorgeous' than others. I had a good feeling toward Japan. I also like the old-fashioned, vintage look of Japan. Therefore, I wanted to live in Japan for a while." (Ngan, female, 30 s)
Escaping societal pressures	"If I graduate [from university in Vietnam] without a job, I would be called up for military service. That was also an enormous motivation for me to go [to Japan]." (Tuan, male, 30 s)
Seeking mental and emotional well-being	"Well, actually I couldn't get into the university [in Vietnam] where I wanted to go [...] well [...] (smile) I feel that Vietnam has a very strict education system [...] I have to learn a lot of things to prepare for the exam and I don't want to go back to those horrible times again." (Thao, female, 20 s)
Personal development	"I went with the mindset of going to [Japan to] experience, to learn, and having a better environment to develop myself." (Mai, female, 30 s)
Instrumental Aspirations	
Career Opportunities	"I thought that if I knew another language [...] I will have a higher chance of getting a good job and earning a living." (Khoa, male, 20 s)
Escaping job market uncertainties for career prospects	"[the head officer] promised to increase my salary but never mentioned it after then. Therefore, I felt distrustful, I didn't want to work with them. There was no clear commitment that they would increase my salary." (My, male, 30 s)
Overlapping Dimensions	
Combination of 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' motivations	"I thought that I'm still at a young age. Therefore, I just wanted to have more experiences in another country as well as to explore more Japanese culture. I think that it would be much easier for me to get a good job back home [after that]." (Tien, 20 s)

Data Analysis

The analysis was supported by MAXQDA software to manage and organize the data efficiently. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes related to instrumental and intrinsic aspirations. This analysis followed the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of the following steps: (1) Familiarization with the data: Transcripts were read multiple times to immerse themselves in the material; (2) generating initial codes: recurring themes were identified and coded; (3) searching for broader themes: codes were clustered into meaningful categories to form broader themes; (4) reviewing themes: themes were evaluated to ensure that they were coherent and aligned with the data; (5) defining and naming themes: each theme was clearly defined and named to capture the essence of participants' experiences; and (6) producing the report: the final report integrated these themes into the study's theoretical framework. This analysis ensured the credibility and reliability of the findings.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis methodology, the initial step involved becoming familiar with the data, followed by the process of coding. This coding entailed identifying frequently referenced concepts across the transcripts. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes, culminating in the identification of six primary themes: four categorized under intrinsic aspirations (the pursuit of cultural exploration through living abroad, the desire to escape societal pressures, the need for mental and emotional well-being, and the focus on personal development), alongside two categorized under instrumental aspirations (employment opportunities and the desire to mitigate uncertainties in the job market). This systematic coding approach ensured that the identified themes accurately represented the aspirations of the VIS in Japan.

Ethical approval was obtained from the author's affiliated institution, following the standards set by the independent review board (IRB).

RESULTS

The thematic analysis process led to the identification of key themes related to both intrinsic and instrumental aspirations. Specifically, four major themes emerged under intrinsic aspirations: (1) living abroad for cultural exploration, (2) escaping societal pressures, (3) seeking mental and emotional well-being, and (4) personal development. Moreover, instrumental aspirations were categorized into (1) career opportunities and (2) escape from job market uncertainty for career prospects. Additionally, the analysis revealed significant overlaps between instrumental and intrinsic motivations, highlighting the complexity of VIS aspirations (see Table 1). These thematic findings form the foundation for subsequent discussion of the results.

Intrinsic Aspirations

Living abroad

The theme of ‘living abroad for cultural exploration’ emerged from repeated mentions of students’ admiration for Japanese culture, aesthetics, and lifestyle. During coding, phrases such as ‘I feel Japan is more gorgeous,’ ‘I like the old-fashioned, vintage look of Japan,’ and ‘I wanted to live in Japan for a while’ were frequently highlighted across multiple transcripts. These recurring patterns formed the basis for this theme.

The analysis further revealed that the aspiration to live abroad was particularly prominent among participants who had never traveled outside Vietnam. For these individuals, residing in a foreign country represents an opportunity to explore unfamiliar environments and bridge experiential gaps in their personal and cultural understanding (Murphy-Lejeune, 2001). This pursuit is driven by intrinsic motivation, as participants perceive the experience of living abroad as inherently fulfilling and valuable in its own right.

Ngan went to Japan to study in her early 20 s right after obtaining a bachelor’s degree majoring in the Japanese language and culture from a university in Vietnam. Although she does not have a clear reason for her aspirations, she was strongly impressed by the beautiful lifestyle of Japan and wanted to experience it firsthand:

Actually, I don’t have a clear reason why I like Japan. I don’t like Korea; I don’t like K-pop. I feel Japan is more ‘*gorgeous*’ than others. I had a good feeling toward Japan. I also like the old-fashioned, vintage look of Japan. Therefore, I wanted to live in Japan for a while. (Ngan, female, 30 s³)

Similarly, Hue arrived in Japan in her early 20 s after graduating from vocational school and spent nearly two years as an accountant at a Chinese-affiliated company in Vietnam. With most of the company’s business partners being Japanese customers, she had numerous chances to interact with Japanese individuals. The more she works with them and learns about their cultural norms, the more she deeply admires the people and their elegant customs. This deepened her desire to choose and live in Japan above any other country.

Well, to be honest, I have always had the idea of living abroad, not strongly, but thinly, [...] everything happened when, the previous company where I worked for two years [in Vietnam], the customer was mostly Japanese people, and then I started to be curious about Japan. The

³ The age calculated at the time of conducting the interview.

more I searched, the more I liked Japan and longed for it, so I chose Japan. (Hue, female, 30 s)

Working with Japanese people and understanding their culture may be among the factors that influence Hue's decision to visit Japan. However, without the desire to 'live' abroad, her aspirations for mobility may not have been enough to make the move. Therefore, the aspiration to live abroad is not necessarily the key factor but rather a crucial factor that needs to be considered when Vietnamese students are thinking about where to study. The desire to live abroad is an intrinsic dimension that drives many VISs overseas. Specifically, for many who dream of a better life or have never been abroad, living abroad can have an intrinsic value beyond the value of academic pursuits.

Escaping Societal Pressures

The findings reveal that, in addition to cultural admiration, many participants ascribe intrinsic value to the experience of studying abroad. The experience of studying abroad brings them joy, and it mitigates negative emotions. When personal freedoms are constrained in their home country, the opportunity to study abroad enables these individuals to regain a sense of control over their lives.

In the following quote, a young man who graduated from a university in Vietnam majoring in Japanese language and culture in his early 20 s argues that he applied for study in Japan right after finishing his studies since he was concerned about being called up for military service in Vietnam:

If I graduate [from a university in Vietnam] without a job, I would be called up for military service. That was also an enormous motivation for me to go [to Japan]. I remember that even if you have a job [after graduation], you will have to take a short course. I did not like it, so I decided to go [and study abroad]. (Tuan, female, 30 s)

In Vietnam, men aged 18 to under 26 will be conscripted into military services, either in regular armed forces or reserve forces, as a responsibility to their homeland (Constitution of Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2015). However, many Vietnamese view this compulsory service as stressful and demanding, prompting some young men to consider leaving the country to avoid conscription. In this context, studying in Japan holds significant appeal, as it provides an opportunity to bypass military service, reducing anxiety and enhancing overall well-being.

Seeking Mental and Emotional Well-being

For some Vietnamese high school students, particularly VISs in Japan, studying abroad serves as a means to escape the pressures of the Vietnamese education system. The competitive nature of university entrance exams in

Vietnam often results in intense stress, and failure to gain immediate admission can lead to feelings of personal failure and social stigma. In this context, studying abroad is perceived as a way to mitigate these negative emotions and enhance overall well-being. This perspective is exemplified in the following statements:

Well, actually I couldn't get into the university [in Vietnam] where I wanted to go [...] well [...] (smile) I feel that Vietnam has a very strict education system [...] I have to learn a lot of things to prepare for the exam and I don't want to go back to those horrible times again. (Thao, female, 20 s)

When I had just finished the exam and determined on my score, I felt both shocked and sad, so I decided to go to Osaka to relieve my fatigue. (Anh, female, 20 s)

In Vietnam, pursuing higher education immediately after completing secondary school is perceived as the primary pathway to future success (Pham & Starkey, 2016). This societal expectation places substantial pressure on young individuals to diligently study and excel academically to obtain employment and ensure financial stability. The experience of failing the entrance examination can be particularly arduous, as it necessitates further extensive study and may expose individuals to potential stigmas from their communities. Consequently, this situation significantly contributes to enhancing students' motivation to seek educational opportunities abroad, as study abroad experience can positively influence their mental and emotional well-being.

Personal development

In addition to escaping societal constraints, seeking mental and emotional well-being, or cultural exploration, many students framed their study-abroad aspirations as a journey of self-improvement. They sought new experiences, challenges, and opportunities for personal growth, often emphasizing their desire to develop new skills and expand their worldviews. This intrinsic motivation underscores the broader significance of studying abroad beyond academic or career-related goals. The frequent mention of these ideas during coding helped establish this theme.

In addition, I chose to spend time studying in Japan because I wanted to experience more in the modern environment. (Viet, male, 30 s)

[...] the most important thing is I have a chance to learn new things and get to know new cultures, their way of life, and their way of thinking. which idea is good, I absorb it to help develop myself [...]. (Hoang, male, 20 s)

Initially, I wanted to see what it was like. I just wanted to go for fun. (Hung, male, 20 s)

I went with the mindset of going to [Japan to] experience, to learn, and having a better environment to develop myself. (Mai, female, 30 s)

Interestingly, the intrinsic motivation to study abroad is also closely linked to personal characteristics such as personal traits, age, and gender. Consider the case of Hien (20 s), an introverted and passive young student who struggled with career direction in Vietnam. Following her mother's advice, she decided to study in Japan, expressing her aspirations for personal development:

[...] I just wanted to learn new things and figure out what I would like to do and interact with many people. Because during the time when I was in Vietnam, I was quite introverted [...] [It] appeared to be I got lost among many pathways to choose from, [and] my mother said [to me]: 'Just make a change. Who knows [what will happen]? If you get out of the home context, maybe you can determine what you would like to do.' Listening to my mother's advice, I decided to go [to Japan]. (Hien, female, 20 s)

This case illustrates how studying abroad can fulfill intrinsic needs for self-discovery and personal growth. By stepping out of their comfort zones, students can gain new experiences in a different social context, enhancing their well-being. Additionally, concerns about age were expressed by some participants, suggesting that age may influence their aspirations to study abroad.

Because of my age, I just wanted to find new experiences. At that time [in 2017], I was nearly 30 years old. If I [decide to] continue my studies, I only wanted to go to a graduate school for a PhD, I didn't want to retake a bachelor's degree. However, at that time, my [Japanese] language level was not good enough to apply for a PhD program. Moreover, I did not want to study further, so I decided to work [in Japan after finishing the Japanese language course]. (Ngoc, female, 30 s)

I thought [at that time] that I'm still young. Therefore, I just wanted to have more experiences in another country as well as to explore more about Japanese culture. (Tien, male, 20 s)

In summary, personal traits and age play crucial roles in shaping the decision to study abroad among Vietnamese students. While previous research (Netz, 2021) suggests that women tend to consider future experiences more carefully, whereas men prioritize career advancement, gender differences were not evident in this qualitative study. The narratives of Tien and Ngoc illustrate that motivations to study abroad are highly individualized and cannot be generalized

on the basis of gender. These findings highlight the importance of considering personal characteristics (i.e., age, gender, personality traits) when examining the study-abroad aspirations of the VIS in Japan.

Instrumental Aspirations

Career Opportunities

Consistent with prior research, a dominant theme in the interviews was the perception that studying in Japan could enhance students' career opportunities. Many participants believed that acquiring a foreign degree and language proficiency would improve their employability, either in Japan or Vietnam. This aspiration was particularly prevalent among those who viewed international education as a means for gaining a competitive edge in the job market.

For example, Khoa, a graduate from one of Vietnam's top-ranked English-specialized high schools, opted to study in Japan because of concerns regarding the Vietnamese labor market. His experience illustrates the challenges that fresh graduates often encounter when seeking employment:

You know what, in Vietnam, when looking for a job, they won't distinguish between a new graduate or already graduated; they often ask, 'Do you have any job experience, and how many years of experience?' (Khoa, male, 20 s)

The Vietnamese labor market favors candidates with prior work experience, specialized skills (i.e., IT and programming), foreign language proficiency, and study-abroad experience (General Statistics Office, 2024). As a result, many students, including VISs in Japan, see multilingual proficiency as an asset that enhances their employability.

The first foreign language that is always asked is "English" [...] I am just one person who can communicate fluently in English. In addition, hundreds of Vietnamese people can speak English very well. Therefore, the chance that I can compete with everyone in Vietnam will be very low and difficult [...] so I thought that if I knew another language [...] I will have a greater chance of getting a good job and earning a living. (Khoa, male, 20 s)

English proficiency is highly valued in the Vietnamese labor market, particularly since the country's economic liberalization during the 'Doi Moi' period, which facilitated foreign direct investment (Beresford, 2008). While English proficiency and overseas experience create opportunities for employment in multinational companies, the increasing number of English-speaking graduates has led to heightened competition. As a result, many VISs aim to acquire an additional foreign language or seek education abroad to gain a competitive edge.

Vietnamese students in Japan exemplify this trend, as they often encounter difficulties in securing English-based jobs and, therefore, consider Japanese language proficiency an essential tool for reducing the risk of unemployment. This perception further underscores the role of studying abroad as a strategic means to enhance career prospects and ensure long-term financial stability.

Escaping Job Market Uncertainties for Career Prospects

In addition to improving career opportunities, studying abroad is also perceived as a means of escaping an unfavorable domestic job market to maximize income. While the number of workers in Vietnam continues to rise, labor market quality remains a concern. A significant proportion of workers are engaged in precarious, unstable employment, and this trend appears to be increasing (General Statistics Office, 2024). The lack of a reliable employment system has left many workers feeling disillusioned, prompting them to seek employment abroad, where they perceive greater stability and security. This sentiment is reflected in the following statement:

[The head officer] promised to increase my salary but never mentioned it after then. Therefore, I felt distrustful; I didn't want to work with them. There was no clear commitment that they would increase my salary.
(My, male, 30 s)

The absence of transparent work commitments is a key factor discouraging individuals from working in domestic companies. Instead, many prefer employment with foreign-affiliated firms in Vietnam or choose to move abroad for better career development. Although this case may not be representative of the entire Vietnamese labor market, it highlights concerns regarding workplace conditions and employment security. In this context, studying in Japan serves as a means for many individuals to escape an unfavorable work environment and secure better professional opportunities, whether through higher salaries or more stable employment conditions.

Overlapping of 'Intrinsic' and 'Instrumental' Dimensions

While intrinsic and instrumental aspirations were analyzed as separate categories, the findings suggest that they are deeply interconnected, challenging prior research that often separates economic incentives from cultural motivations in the case of VIS in Japan (Hashimoto, 2022; Mazumi, 2023; Sato, 2021). Many students viewed studying abroad as both an opportunity for self-improvement and a strategic move to increase their employability. For example, participants often framed their decision to study in Japan as a combination of cultural curiosity and career advancement. This overlap highlights the complexity of migration aspirations, underscoring the need for a holistic approach to understanding students' mobility decisions.

For example, while securing better employment was a key motivation for many participants, they also valued the opportunity to experience life abroad and broaden their cultural perspectives:

I thought that I am still at a young age. Therefore, I just wanted to have more experiences in another country as well as to explore more Japanese culture. I think that it would be much easier for me to get a good job back home [after that]. (Tien, male, 20 s)

Study abroad means studying. Making money is certainly part of it. However, the most important thing is that I have a chance to learn new things, get to know new cultures, their way of life, and their way of thinking. The ideas that are good [for me], I adopt them to develop myself, those that are not, I leave. Later, when I have children, I can teach them everything I've learned. (Hoang, male, 20 s)

In these quotes, study abroad is perceived as offering both 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' values. As Tien noted, it can lead to a "good job", whereas Hoang emphasized the opportunity to "make money". However, intrinsic benefits, such as "gaining experiences and exploring Japanese culture" (Tien) and "learning new things" (Hoang), are closely linked to these instrumental goals.

This nuanced understanding challenges the dominant focus on economic incentives in the previous literature (Hashimoto, 2022; Mazumi, 2023; Sato, 2021). The findings suggest that Vietnamese student mobility to Japan is driven not only by career aspirations but also by a broader desire for self-improvement and cross-cultural learning. The interplay between these motivations highlights the complexity of Vietnamese students' decisions to study abroad and underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach in analyzing migration aspirations.

In conclusion, through thematic analysis, this study systematically identified six primary themes from participants' narratives, revealing a nuanced interplay between instrumental and intrinsic aspirations. The iterative coding process effectively captured key patterns in students' motivations with precision. The findings reveal that the complex nature of aspirations to study abroad cannot be attributed solely to economic incentives; rather, these aspirations are significantly intertwined with personal development and sociocultural considerations. The next section further contextualizes these findings in relation to the literature and theoretical perspectives.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the aspirations to study abroad, using the case of VIS in Japan, with a particular focus on the intrinsic dimensions of these aspirations—an aspect that remains underexplored in existing research. While economic incentives, such as career advancement and financial stability, continue to be significant motivators, intrinsic factors, including personal development and cultural admiration, are equally influential. These findings

challenge previous studies on VIS in Japan, which tend to separate economic incentives (instrumental aspirations) from cultural motivations (intrinsic aspirations) (see, for example, Hashimoto, 2022; Mazumi, 2023; Sato, 2021). Notably, while many participants initially framed their aspirations in economic terms, they later acknowledged that their motivations were multifaceted and encompassed personal dimensions. Without recognizing these deeper intrinsic aspirations, it is difficult to fully understand the underlying motivations that drive individuals to seek instrumental benefits abroad.

By situating individual aspirations within broader sociocultural contexts and personal characteristics on the basis of narrative data, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Vietnamese student mobility in Japan. The findings highlight that migration decisions are often shaped by the desire to escape rigid societal expectations, such as pressures related to education and gender expectations (e.g., compulsory military service). Additionally, personal traits (e.g., introversion) and age play crucial roles in shaping students' motivations to study abroad. In particular, this study challenges previous research on gender roles, which suggests that women prioritize personal experiences, whereas men focus on career advancement. In contrast, this study finds no clear evidence of such gendered distinctions. Overall, the study contributes to the literature by offering a more comprehensive perspective on current mobility trends among VISs in Japan, emphasizing that sociocultural contexts and personal characteristics intrinsically shape study aspirations.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the migration motivations of VISs in Japan may reflect broader patterns among other Vietnamese migrant groups, including skilled workers and temporary visitors. This underscores the need for further research examining how intrinsic and instrumental aspirations interact across different migrant populations.

This study also contributes to a broader understanding of international student mobility in Japan by comparing the aspirations of Vietnamese and Chinese students—the two largest international student groups in Japan as of 2023 (ISA database). Previous studies have highlighted that Chinese students are driven predominantly by intrinsic aspirations, such as the desire for personal growth, new experiences, and cultural exploration (Jiao, 2025). Conversely, Vietnamese students have often been characterized as *'disguised students'*, whose primary motivation for studying in Japan is economic—primarily to work rather than to pursue education (Nishinippon Shimbunsha, 2017, as cited in Mazumi, 2021). This perception is largely influenced by differences in economic conditions, with China having a more developed economy than Vietnam does. However, the findings of this study challenge this stereotype. Vietnamese students in Japan also exhibit intrinsic aspirations similar to those of their Chinese counterparts. The increasing economic development in Vietnam has led to the rise of middle-class households, which in turn has diversified the aspirations of Vietnamese students. Many now prioritize personal growth, international exposure, and academic enrichment alongside economic opportunities. These findings suggest a shifting landscape of student mobility motivations and emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding of Vietnamese students' study-abroad experiences.

Implications

In addition to its academic contributions, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers and higher education institutions seeking to attract and retain international students. Given the interplay between intrinsic aspirations and instrumental aspirations, the following policy recommendations are proposed to enhance Japan's competitiveness as a study-abroad destination and improve the overall experience of the VIS.

- (1) Improving cultural and social integration
 - Customized orientation sessions that cover social norms, academics, language, and mental health were created.
 - Student associations and mentorship programs should be strengthened.
- (2) Improving employment and career support
 - Increase internships and job fairs linking VIS with employers.
 - Establish stable employment commitments that include bonuses, salary increases, and promotional opportunities that recognize individual skills and contributions.
 - Postgraduate work visa policies are simpler and easier to access.
- (3) Promotion of long-term retention
 - Streamline work visa applications for graduates.
 - Introducing residency pathways in in-demand industries (i.e., IT).
 - Cultural and language training should be provided to help with workplace integration.

These measures will improve the VIS's study experience and help Japan attract and retain skilled talent from abroad.

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