

11 January 2022

Dear Ambassador,

Happy New Year. I hope that you, your family, and all of the staff at the Embassy in London are well and coping with the continuing challenges.

I am writing to you today in my capacity as President of the British Association for Japanese Studies to pass on my concerns and those of other colleagues involved in Japanese Studies in relation to the way in which the Japanese Government is handling the COVID-19 pandemic and its policy of restricting entry to the country. The measures are greatly impacting the academic and mental well-being of academics, students, and others. In this letter, we want to particularly focus upon the impact on students, but the issues are also having a detrimental impact on academics and others too.

At present, students without Japanese nationality are not able to enter Japan, and some of them have now been waiting for almost two years. While some Japanese universities and language schools are offering on-line provision, for people trying to study the language this is much less effective than living in Japan, and the time difference from the UK is highly problematic. It would appear that some Japanese bodies are not fully taking account of this last issue since the vast majority of foreign students in Japan are from other Asian countries (similarly some institutions in the UK are also overlooking the time zone issues in relation to Japan as the majority of foreign language students study in Europe). Many UK institutions are reporting students either requesting (another) Interruption of Study or giving up their studies of Japan/Japanese altogether. We are seeing a situation whereby many students are going to be graduating (again) having never been to Japan and have much lower levels of Japanese language proficiency and understanding of the country that their sempai.

Based on the latest data, the Japanese government's current policy has no scientific basis. Omicron is highly infectious and so is now spreading rapidly in Japan anyway. Since Japanese people (and foreigners already resident in Japan) are able to enter the country, they are just as likely to bring in COVID as other foreigners are. While there may be an argument to continue to restrict general tourism – restricting entry of students (and academics travelling for research) would appear to be overly cautious. The WHO on 30th November advised that 'Blanket travel bans will not prevent the international spread, and they place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods'.

The policy is also highly unfair. All other major developed countries have an entry route involving mandated testing and quarantining, normally at the applicant's expense. Many places, Madeira in Portugal being a particularly good example, have set up systems that not only look after the local population, but also visitors, and ensure that everyone is looked after well and fully respected. The UK allows visitors even from 'red-listed' nations to enter, and it certainly continues to allow the entry of Japanese students.

The policy is having a disastrous effect on Japanese studies, and this will have important knock-on effects when it comes to Japan's standing in the world. Sharp declines in student numbers may soon start to threaten the continued existence of Japanese departments in

some universities, and we'll be entering a new era of 'Japan passing' in which Japan's interests are increasingly ignored in various international discussions.

While it makes sense to restrict short-term visitors such as tourists in the current environment, there needs to be a means of entry for longer-term visitors like students. There must be a sensible way to do this that presents very little risk to Japan, as almost all other countries have managed it. Typically the requirements are (i) a negative COVID test within 48 hours before boarding the flight (ii) on arrival, quarantine in a designated hotel, for a specified period, with the hotel policed such that guests are not able to leave their rooms and (iii) a requirement for, say, two negative tests before release from this quarantine.

I sincerely hope that you will be able to raise these concerns with the appropriate authorities.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Christopher Hood

President, British Association for Japanese Studies

Letter also signed by

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