

Language Learning, Cultural Adaptation, and Student Mental Wellbeing: Case of MEXT scholars to Japan

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Abstract: Economic liberalization in India in the early 1990s, along with rising living standards, has significantly increased the number of Indian nationals traveling abroad for employment and higher education.

Students pursuing education in foreign universities often experience considerable psychological stress and emotional challenges. These stresses arise from several factors, including: (1) separation from family and familiar social networks, (2) adjustment to a new geopolitical and cultural environment, (3) adaptation to unfamiliar academic systems and expectations, and (4) the necessity of independent living.

Each year, seven to eight students from the Japanese Language Department of Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth (TMV) travel to Japan for a one-year study program under the scholarship offered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT). Despite having prior knowledge of the Japanese language and culture, these students encounter many of the aforementioned challenges, particularly during the initial stages of their stay.

This study is based on a questionnaire survey conducted with nine MEXT scholars. The objectives of the study are: (1) to understand the challenges faced by students and the coping mechanisms they adopt, (2) to identify measures that can better prepare students prior to their departure for Japan, and (3) to explore how TMV's Japanese Language Department can support students' mental well-being throughout their stay abroad.

The findings highlight a range of psychological, lifestyle-related, and academic issues experienced by the students.

This paper proposes the following practical measures that TMV's Japanese Language Department can implement to help minimize the stress experienced by MEXT scholars during their time in Japan.

1. Create a guidebook about life in Japan,
2. Arrange an orientation session,
3. Assign a session on writing a research paper,
4. Assign a faculty mentor to each student,
5. Arrange meetings,
6. Arrange a session on mental health

Keywords: acculturative stress, expectation-reality gap, stressors, measures, support

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Globalization and Student Mobility

The world is increasingly becoming a global village, and international travel has become significantly more accessible over the past three decades. Globalization has created expanded opportunities for employment abroad as well as for pursuing higher education in foreign universities.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, approximately 1.88 million Indian students were studying abroad as of January 1, 2025. Of these, around 1.25 million were enrolled in higher education programs.

As reported by the Indian Embassy in Tokyo, nearly 2,200 Indian students are currently studying in Japan. The number of students opting to pursue higher education overseas continues to rise each year. In this context, mental health has emerged as a critical concern for international students.

Each year, seven to eight students from the Japanese Language Department of Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth (TMV) travel to Japan for a one-year study program under scholarships offered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan. Despite having prior knowledge of the Japanese language and culture, these students face several challenges that lead to considerable stress, particularly during the initial phase of their stay.

1.2 Formation of Pre-departure Expectations

MEXT scholars typically undergo two to three years of Japanese language training prior to their departure to Japan. As language and culture are deeply interconnected, this period of study also provides students with valuable insights into Japanese culture, traditions, and social norms.

In addition to formal learning, students are increasingly influenced by popular representations of Japan through social media and contemporary cultural mediums such as anime. Tourists often portray visually appealing and culturally rich experiences of Japan through photographs and short videos, while anime presents an idealized and aesthetically engaging depiction of

Japanese life and society. Consequently, students tend to develop a positive - often romanticized - image of Japan prior to their arrival.

This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of expectation–reality gap theory, wherein preconceived expectations differ significantly from actual lived experiences. Upon arrival, students are confronted with the practical realities of long-term residence, leading to a mismatch between expectations and reality.

1.3 Culture Shock and Adjustment Process

Furthermore, this transition aligns with the concept of culture shock, as proposed by Kalervo Oberg. According to Oberg (1960), individuals entering a new cultural environment experience stages of adjustment, including an initial “honeymoon phase” followed by a period of frustration and anxiety. The early challenges faced by MEXT scholars - such as navigating administrative systems, adapting to structured societal norms, and establishing daily routines - are characteristic of this “crisis phase.”

1.4 Acculturation and Acculturative Stress

The students’ experiences can also be interpreted through John W. Berry acculturation framework. Berry (1997) explains that adapting to a new cultural environment often leads to acculturative stress, particularly when individuals must simultaneously adjust to new academic, social, and cultural expectations.

1.5 Mental Health Challenges Among International Students

Recent research further reinforces these theoretical perspectives. Studies have consistently shown that international students experience higher levels of psychological distress compared to domestic students, highlighting mental health as a significant concern in this population (Maharaj et al., 2025). A systematic review and meta-analysis found a strong association between acculturative stress and negative psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction among international students (Amlashi et al., 2024).

Additionally, contemporary studies indicate that factors such as language barriers, lack of social support, and unfamiliar cultural norms significantly contribute to mental health challenges among international students (Xiong et al., 2025).

1.6 Role of Social Support and Coping Mechanisms

Social support plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of acculturative stress. Support from peers, seniors, faculty members, and local communities has been shown to significantly improve students' psychological well-being (Ersoy et al., 2025; Riaz, 2025).

The presence of supportive networks helps students navigate unfamiliar environments, build a sense of belonging, and develop effective coping strategies. Conversely, limited social interaction - particularly among more introverted students - can hinder adjustment and prolong stress.

1.7 Barriers to Help-Seeking Behaviour

Another important dimension highlighted in recent literature is the role of mental health stigma, which often prevents international students from seeking professional help, even when services are available (Kolinska, 2025). This aligns with the findings of the present study, where students were aware of counselling services but did not utilize them.

1.8 Implications for Institutional Support

The existing literature underscores the importance of structured institutional interventions to support international students. Pre-departure orientation, academic preparedness, social integration initiatives, and continuous mentoring have been identified as effective measures to reduce stress and facilitate smoother transitions.

Understanding international students' experiences through both classical theories and contemporary research provides a comprehensive framework for designing targeted interventions aimed at improving their mental well-being and overall academic success.

This study aims to: (1) examine the stressors experienced by MEXT scholars during their stay in Japan and the coping mechanisms they adopt; (2) identify measures to better prepare students prior to their departure; and (3) explore how TMV's Japanese Language Department can support students' mental well-being throughout their time abroad.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through a questionnaire survey administered to nine MEXT scholars studying in Japan during the academic years 2024–2025 and 2025–2026. While interviews would have been an ideal methodology, they were not conducted due to time constraints.

The questionnaire comprised both objective questions and descriptive, open-ended items designed to capture insights into the stressors experienced by students and the coping strategies they adopted. It also sought recommendations from participants regarding what they believe would have been helpful to know prior to departing for Japan, as well as measures that could support their mental well-being during their stay.

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key sources of stress.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Sources of stress

The thematic analysis revealed four main sources of stress: (1) Separation from family and familiar social networks, (2) Adjustment to a new geopolitical and cultural environment, (3) Adaptation to unfamiliar academic systems and expectations, (4) The necessity of independent living.

The following section outlines the key sources of stress experienced by the students.

1. Separation from family and familiar social networks

For most students, this was their first time living away from their families as well as their first experience in a foreign country. They were suddenly placed in an unfamiliar environment without the immediate support of family members and close friends. All participants reported experiencing feelings of homesickness and loneliness during the initial stages of their stay, with one student indicating severe emotional distress, including suicidal thoughts.

Although many students had access to fellow Indian peers at the same university, it took time to establish meaningful connections and a sense of belonging.

2. Adjustment to a new geopolitical and cultural environment

Japan is a highly disciplined society where rules and systems are strictly observed. Daily life is governed by numerous structured processes, many of which are complex and require careful understanding. For international students, navigating and adhering to these systems can be overwhelming, particularly during the initial stages of their stay.

For instance, waste disposal in Japan requires segregation into multiple categories - often exceeding ten in many cities - making it challenging for newcomers to comply accurately from the outset. In contrast, waste segregation in India is typically limited to two categories, highlighting the extent of adjustment required.

Public transportation presents another significant challenge. Upon arrival, students are often required to navigate multiple train transfers to reach their university. While many are assisted by guides at the airport, those without such support may find it difficult to purchase tickets, manage transfers, and understand transportation rules on their first day. Additionally, students who commute by bus must quickly learn specific procedures, such as boarding protocols and payment methods, which can be confusing in the beginning.

3. Adaptation to unfamiliar academic systems and expectations

The academic system in Japan differs significantly from that in India, presenting additional challenges for students.

For instance, students in Japan are offered a wide range of courses and are required to select subjects from an extensive list. In contrast, Indian academic systems typically provide a more structured curriculum with limited choice. As a result, students often find it difficult to make informed decisions, particularly as these selections must be made within the first week of arrival.

Furthermore, students are expected to undertake and complete a research paper during their stay in Japan. However, undergraduate programs in India generally do not require formal research work, leaving students unfamiliar with research methodologies and academic writing. Consequently, skills such as research design, analysis, and scholarly writing - often assumed as prior knowledge in Japanese universities - pose significant challenges for these students.

4. The necessity of independent living

For many students, this is their first experience of living independently. During the initial days, they are required to manage several essential tasks, such as opening a bank account, obtaining a mobile SIM card, and completing administrative procedures at the ward office related to their long-term stay. Navigating these unfamiliar processes can be a significant source of stress.

In addition, students must independently manage everyday aspects of life, including locating grocery stores and organizing their daily commute to the university, further adding to their adjustment challenges.

3.2 Coping mechanisms

Most students reported that, although they initially felt overwhelmed by the challenges, they gradually adapted to the new lifestyle over time. During the early stages, they relied heavily on support from their families and were eventually able to build friendships in Japan. However, more introverted students found it comparatively difficult to form social connections. Overall, the passage of time, along with gradual adjustment, emerged as the primary coping mechanism for MEXT scholars.

3.3 Formal support systems

Most students were assigned a buddy, tutor, or volunteer during the initial stage to assist with essential formalities such as procedures at the ward office, obtaining a SIM card, and opening a bank account. They also received support in securing accommodation and purchasing necessary furniture. Additionally, most students were assisted in traveling from the airport to their university upon arrival in Japan. However, only one student reported receiving emotional or mental support from their assigned buddy. Several participants indicated that prior awareness of these processes would have eased their transition.

Most Japanese universities provided access to counselling services; however, none of the students reported utilizing these services, despite being aware of their availability. Some universities also offered dedicated help desks for international students to address queries and concerns. In addition, students mentioned participation in social events and gatherings organized by universities to facilitate bonding, as well as opportunities to interact with local communities, which helped reduce feelings of isolation and promoted cultural understanding.

When asked about sources of preparation for life in Japan, all nine students identified their seniors as a key source of support. Six students also reported receiving guidance from individual teachers, while four acknowledged support from Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth (TMV).

Despite this, most students expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided by TMV during their initial period in Japan, noting a lack of continued engagement or communication from the institution throughout their stay.

Regarding pre-departure preparation, five out of nine students expressed satisfaction with the orientation on Japanese culture provided by TMV. An equal number reported that they had some awareness of university life in Japan prior to departure.

3.4 Recommendations by students

The questionnaire sought students' recommendations to better understand potential measures for alleviating stress. Specifically, participants were asked to provide inputs on the following:

1. Aspects they believe they should have known prior to departing for Japan
2. Measures that could help improve the mental well-being of MEXT scholars during their stay in Japan

The table below presents the students' recommendations regarding the information they feel would have been beneficial to know before leaving for Japan.

Table 1: Recommendations about prior awareness

No.	Recommendations
1	Systems in Japan: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public transportation system• Waste segregation practices
2	Administrative Processes in Japan: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Procedures at the ward office• Health insurance enrolment process• Bank account opening procedures

No.	Recommendations
3	Academic Processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course structure and subject selection process• Research paper writing and academic expectations
4	Additional Practical Information: <ol style="list-style-type: none">(1) Availability of groceries in Japan and where to purchase them(2) Essential documents to be carried from India(3) Contact information of other Indian students in Japan(4) Guidance on obtaining and using a SIM card(5) Guidance on understanding and navigating train maps

While some of the systems and procedures mentioned above vary across cities and universities, having a general awareness of the processes to be completed upon arrival in Japan would significantly ease the transition for students.

The table below presents students' recommendations on measures that can be implemented to enhance the mental well-being of MEXT scholars during their stay in Japan.

Table 2: Recommendations to improve mental wellbeing

No.	Recommendations
1	Preparation for managing initial feelings of loneliness
2	Orientation for adapting to an independent, self-reliant lifestyle
3	Training in communication strategies, including initiating and sustaining conversations
4	Regular communication and engagement from TMV, such as online meetings among MEXT scholars to facilitate the sharing of experiences

3.5 Study Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the author proposes the following measures for the Japanese Language Department at TMV to support and enhance the mental well-being of MEXT scholars studying in Japan.

Table 3: Study recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Details
1	Create a guidebook about life in Japan	<p>Develop a comprehensive guidebook, in collaboration with past MEXT scholars and faculty members, to be provided to students prior to their departure for Japan.</p> <p>The guidebook may include the following information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Formal procedures: Processes at the ward office, university administrative procedures, bank account opening, and health insurance enrolment• Daily life systems: Public transportation and waste segregation practices• Additional practical guidance: Grocery options available in Japan, essential documents to carry from India, guidance on obtaining a SIM card, understanding train maps, and using courier services for sending luggage <p>The primary objective of this guidebook would be to enhance students' awareness of life in Japan, enabling them to better anticipate and navigate initial challenges, thereby reducing stress during the early stages of their stay.</p>

No.	Recommendation	Details
2	Arrange an orientation session	<p>Organize an offline or online orientation session, in collaboration with past MEXT scholars and faculty members, prior to students' departure for Japan.</p> <p>The session may focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating awareness about daily life in Japan• Providing an overview of the Japanese academic system, including course selection, research expectations, and academic responsibilities• Addressing student queries through an interactive Q&A session
3	Arrange a session on writing a research paper	<p>Organize an offline or online session, either prior to students' departure or during their stay in Japan, as appropriate, to provide guidance on research methodology and academic writing, including how to develop and write a research paper.</p>
4	Assign a faculty mentor to each student	<p>Assign a faculty mentor from the Japanese Language Department to each student, who will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintain regular communication to provide emotional support, understand emerging concerns, and offer guidance• Periodically report to the Head of the Japanese Language Department on the student's well-being• Provide academic guidance, particularly during the course selection process
5	Arrange meetings	<p>Organize regular online meetings with MEXT scholars during their stay in Japan to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand and address any challenges they may be facing• Gain insights into new systems and experiences encountered in Japan

No.	Recommendation	Details
6	Arrange a session on mental health	Organize an offline or online session on mental health prior to students' departure for Japan to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raise awareness about potential mental health challenges they may encounter in an unfamiliar and independent environment• Provide guidance on effective strategies for managing stress and maintaining well-being

4. CONCLUSION

Understanding the unique stressors experienced by MEXT scholars in Japan is essential for developing effective support mechanisms to promote their well-being. This study highlights the need to implement the recommended measures to enhance students' mental health while studying abroad, thereby fostering a supportive environment for both their academic and personal development.

Furthermore, the study underscores the need for future research to examine the psychological challenges faced by international students visiting TMV and to design appropriate interventions to address these issues.

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