

Explanatory Notes

Mechanisms, Trends, and Challenges in the Acceptance of Foreign Workers in Japanese Agriculture

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1. Introduction

Japanese farmers and corporations that accept intern trainees comply with employment contracts and comprehend the intent of the technical intern training system, by which the accepting parties bear the wages of intern trainees who acquire skills through on-the-job training (OJT).

By working for three years, the intern trainees learn Japanese along with certain skills, return to their home countries with average savings of around three million yen, and put the results of their practical training to use in subsequent employment. As a mechanism for accepting unskilled labor, Japan's system can be viewed as distinctive. Although many countries take in foreign nationals to perform agricultural work, many of these have workers repeatedly engage in simple labor alone, typically without requiring the workers to learn the local language.

Farmers and corporations that wish to employ foreign nationals join a business cooperative of their choosing, then make a request to the cooperative for the hiring of the necessary number of people for a specified period. The employers also specify a type of farming: facility horticulture, crops and vegetables, orchards, pigs, poultry, or dairy. The business cooperatives play a key role as the organizations supervising the acceptance of the workers. They convey the requests to the dispatching organizations in the contracting countries and accompany the farmers or corporations on group interviews arranged by the dispatching organizations six months in advance.

In this symposium, I hope to increase our understanding of the mechanisms and current state of technical intern training for one-time acceptance of unskilled workers in Japan, along with an understanding of the significance of the extension of the program into the new system for Specified Skilled Workers launched in 2019, by which workers can stay for five years and even change their place of employment if

within the same job category. Japan's agricultural sector, which is becoming more dependent on foreigners, is increasingly demanding not only a workforce for simple labor but also higher-level human resources.

2. Expansion of Options through the Establishment of the Specified Skilled Worker Program

In 2019, the Specified Skilled Worker Program was established, and a new work visa was created for the employment of foreigners with specified skills and advanced levels of Japanese. The category "Specified Skilled Worker (i)" targets persons who have satisfactorily completed technical intern training or persons who have passed examinations for specified skills and Japanese. It establishes the option to work as an expert human resource for up to five years, with the ability to change the place of employment if within the same job category.

This program was established to address the rapidly increasing number of industries in Japan that are experiencing shortages of workers, not only for simple labor but at the team leader level as well, creating a need for the employment of foreign nationals in those fields.

3. Current Situation and Future Challenges

The category "Specified Skilled Worker (ii)," allows for renewal of status and accompaniment by workers' families. Once certain conditions are met, an application for a permanent residence visa, which effectively constitutes immigration, is also possible. Introduction and expansion of the Specified Skilled Worker (ii) category in a wide range of industries, including agriculture, has been done. This is a positive step, as there are expectations toward mechanisms that enable application for permanent residence visas by foreign nationals who come to Japan as lesser-educated, unskilled laborers on technical intern training visas.

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