

International working holiday makers in the Niseko area: A research agenda

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Abstract

Numerous studies of working holiday makers (WHMs) have been conducted in Japan and abroad. However, international WHMs staying in Japan have not yet been adequately researched. The working holiday (WH) program in Japan has expanded rapidly in the last decade, so the number of international visitors with a WH visa for Japan has also increased. Their countries of origin have further diversified exponentially, especially in the Niseko area's international ski resorts in Hokkaido. WHMs have contributed to the tourism and hospitality industry in Niseko, and they have become an important part of the entire region's tourism sector. This study analyzes the past and current situations to develop a future research agenda concerning WHMs in the Niseko area.

Keywords

Working holiday
Japan
Niseko
Ski resort

Introduction

Working holiday (WH) programs provide opportunities to live and work abroad that have long been popular among young adults worldwide. Over the years, these programs have expanded so that younger individuals have been offered more choices regarding their WH destinations in recent years. For instance, Australia initially offered WH programs with the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Canada in 1975. Most recently, the Australian government announced that Switzerland would have access to the WH maker (WHM) system from January 1, 2022, onward. Currently, Australia has 45 WH partner countries around the globe (Hawke, 2021).

Japan's WH program started with Australia in 1980 and expanded significantly over the next 40 years. More than 20,000 Japanese people now participate in the program and travel overseas every year (Oishi, 2020). Despite their growing numbers, little is known about international WHMs in Japan including, for example, which places they visit and stay in and how they spend their time in the country.

Niseko is the site of international ski resorts in Hokkaido that have attracted both international tourists and workers (Morikoshi, 2020). In the winter, seasonal laborers, including WHMs from abroad, are essential to the ski resorts' operation. These visitors' life and work experiences in the area are still understudied. Thus, this paper first reviews information about Japan's WH program in general and focuses on international WHMs in the Niseko area to discuss a future research agenda.

Japan's WH Program

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2020) defines the WH program as follows:

The working holiday programmes are, based on bilateral arrangements, intended to make it possible for the youth of Japan and its partner countries/regions to enter each country/region primarily for the purpose of spending holidays while allowing them to engage in employment as an incidental activity of their holidays for

the purpose of supplementing their travel funds. (para. 1)

As of April 1, 2020, Japan had integrated 26 countries and regions into its program (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2020). The current partner countries and regions are listed in Table 1. The number of WH visas issued by the Japanese government has steadily increased. This number reached more than 18,000 in 2019 (see Figure 1).

Japan's WH partnership with Australia has the longest history. Australians with WH visas have consistently come to Japan every year since the program started. South Korea and Taiwan are currently sending the most WHMs to Japan, followed by Australia, France, and the United Kingdom (see Figure 2). Japan's WH system has expanded to include WHMs coming from South American countries (e.g., Argentina and Chile) and European countries (e.g., the Czech Republic and Lithuania).

International WHMs in Japan

From an academic perspective, little is known about international WHMs in Japan. However, local newspapers occasionally report on WHMs in regional areas. For instance, one article in *Hokkaido Shimbun* covered a Taiwanese woman who learned Japanese in high school and university in her home country and then visited Hokkaido's eastern side on a WH visa. Later, she settled in the area and became a nature guide (Kuninori, 2021). Information about international WHMs can also be gathered from various websites. For example, Okinawa's diving companies recruit WHMs to assist them with their summer diving tours (Marine House Seasir, n.d.). A language school in Kyoto provides information about the WH system in Japan and assists Taiwanese people with joining the WH program in Japan (Kyoto Language Center, n.d.). These fragments of information cover some aspects of WHMs in Japan.

In addition, the Japan Association for Working Holiday Makers (JAWHM), an organization which has long provided

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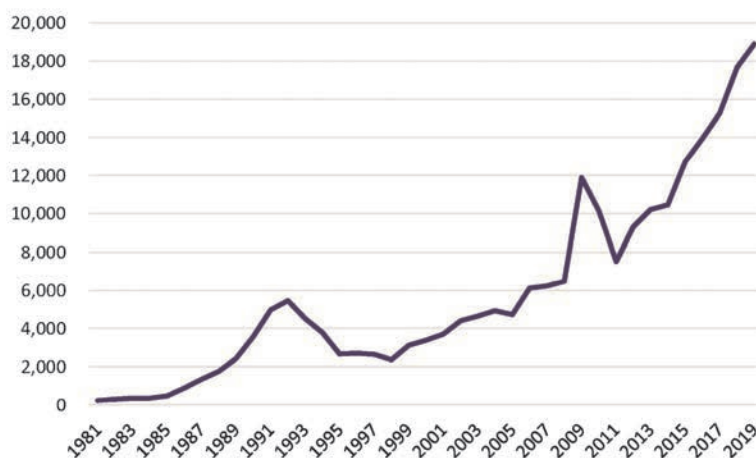
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Table 1. WH Program Partner Countries and Regions, Year Started, and Maximum Number of Visas Allowed

	Country/Region	Year Started	Maximum Number of Visas Allowed Per Year
1	Australia	1980	No limit
2	New Zealand	1985	No limit
3	Canada	1986	6,500
4	Republic of Korea	1999	10,000
5	France	2000 ^a	1,500
6	Germany	2000	No limit
7	The United Kingdom	2001	1,000
8	Ireland	2007	800
9	Denmark	2007	No limit
10	Taiwan	2009	10,000
11	Hong Kong	2010	1,500
12	Norway	2013	No limit
13	Portugal	2015	No limit
14	Poland	2015	500
15	Slovakia	2016	400
16	Austria	2016	200
17	Hungary	2017	200
18	Spain	2017	500
19	Argentina	2017	From Japan to Argentina: 200 From Argentina to Japan: 400
20	Chile	2018	200
21	Iceland	2018	30
22	Czech	2018	400
23	Lithuania	2019	100
24	Sweden	2020	No limit
25	Estonia	2020	From Japan to Estonia: No limit From Estonia to Japan: 100
26	The Netherlands	2020	200

^aStarted provisionally in December 1999.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2020)

**Figure 1.** Number of WH Visas Issued for International Visitors to Japan

Source: The Japan Association for Working Holiday Makers (JAWHM) (2019)

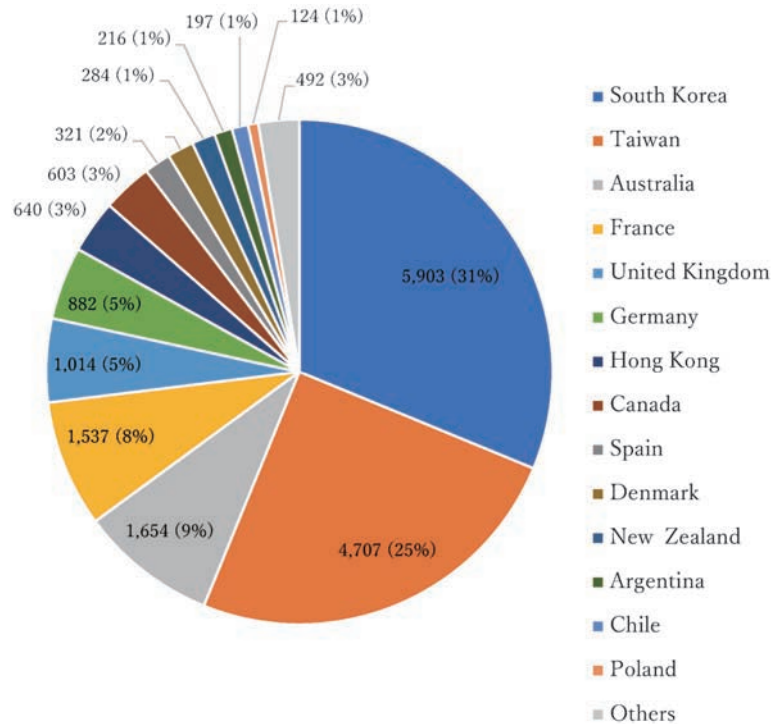


Figure 2. WH Visas Issued to International Visitors to Japan by Country and region in 2019
Source: JAWHM (2019)

information about the WH program to Japanese youths, also works with foreigners who are interested in Japan's WH system by offering details about the program in English, German, and French on their website. This organization also provides a job board on its website. Business owners who want to recruit English-speaking Japanese people or WHMs from overseas post open positions. The jobs posted cover a variety of fields, including tourism, education, and information and communications (JAWHM, n.d.).

The JAWHM (2019) provided the present study with useful information, including that international WHMs often stay in bigger cities such as Tokyo and find employment in the service industry. Others prefer to stay in resort areas, such as Okinawa and Niseko, to work in tourism-related companies and enjoy sports and activities. International WHMs can also be found in more agricultural regions with serious labor shortages, or these individuals may travel around Japan (Morikoshi & Nagai, 2021). WHMs join the labor force in their chosen destinations, helping to alleviate regional and sectoral labor shortages in the country (Takeda, 2017). Furthermore, as cases in other countries, these workers could be important consumers who enroll in educational programs and buy tourism products at their destinations (Fujioka, 2012). International WHMs are, however, not yet fully understood by scholars because these visitors are rarely the focus of public and political discussions (Opara, 2018).

WHMs in Niseko

International WHMs frequently choose to visit and work in the Niseko area, which contains Hokkaido's international ski resorts (see Figure 3). These individuals are often featured in newspapers and magazines and are the focus of some academic research. As Niseko's international tourism grew, the number of non-domestic guest stays increased from 170,100 in 2008-2009 to 682,500 in 2018-2019 (Niseko Promotion Board,

2021).

In addition, foreign investors have become extremely active in this area. For instance, two international brand hotels—Park Hyatt Niseko Hanazono and Higashiyama Niseko Village, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve—opened in 2020 and 2021, respectively. More international hotels and luxurious condominiums continue to be built in the area (K. Takahashi, 2020). Many foreign workers are therefore employed by the resorts, and additional seasonal laborers, including international WHMs, are needed in the Niseko area (Morikoshi & Nagai, 2021).

Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the main part of the Niseko ski resort area, Kutchan, received the highest number of registered foreigners (2,602), who accounted for 15% of Kutchan's population. This statistic also indicates that the number of registered foreigners increased fivefold over the prior 10 years. Many of the registered foreigners work for the ski resorts in the winter, and more than half of them are considered WHMs, who have become an essential segment of the workforce for this resort area (Y. Takahashi, 2020).

The WHMs work in hospitality and tourism-related companies and participate in winter sports, but most of them leave the area in April and May (Y. Takahashi, 2020). Some international WHMs, however, stay in Niseko for the summer and work in agriculture. Many foreign residents have started or continued businesses in the Niseko area after they originally came to the region through the WH program (Morikoshi & Nagai, 2021). International WHMs have overall become vital human resources in Niseko.

The WH system is also beneficial for the area because the program attracts young talents from all over the world and promotes multicultural interactions in the local population (Burns, 2020; Morikoshi & Nagai, 2021; Takeda, 2017). Another advantage of hosting international WHMs is that the resorts can provide more chances to open businesses because these visitors generate a wide variety of international

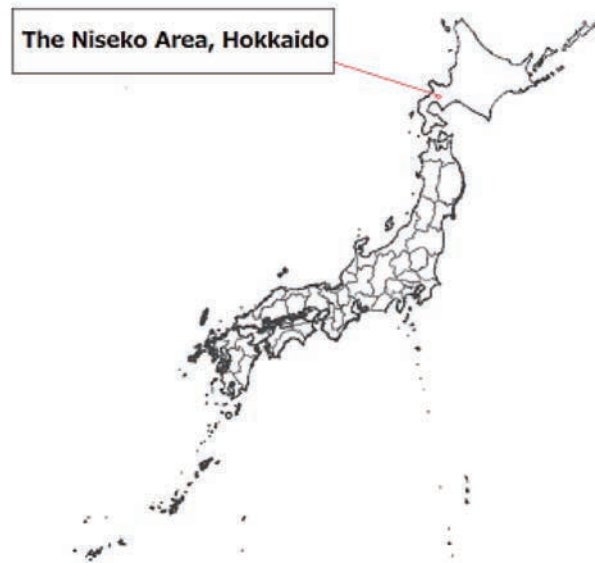


Figure 3. Map of Niseko Area

Note. Map image adapted from the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (n. d.).

opportunities. The new talents attracted to the area have diverse backgrounds, language skills, and cultural understanding (Takeda, 2017), as well as diverse consumption behaviors (Morikoshi & Nagai, 2021).

Conclusion and Proposed Research Agenda

As Japan's WH program has expanded, the number of international WHMs coming to Japan has steadily increased. These visitors' countries of origin and backgrounds vary, and these WHMs are distributed across much of the country. However, they have not been studied, especially in the Niseko area, which has hosted WHMs from a wide range of countries and regions, despite the significant presence of these workers. Therefore, this paper proposes the following questions to be examined in future studies.

Impact of international WHMs on society

The impact of international WHMs on Niseko should be investigated, including, among other topics, the benefits and drawbacks for the Niseko area resulting from hosting these workers. Most have, at present, returned to their home countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but interviews can be conducted with people and companies in the Niseko area that have worked with international WHMs in the past. The data gathered will not only provide an overview of local international WHMs' profiles but also describe their impacts on the area. Once the government begins issuing WH visas again, it is expected that WHMs will come back to Niseko, and researchers will be able to question them directly.

Profiles of international WHMs in Niseko and their motivations

To build these workers' profiles, studies should gather data on these individuals, including their country of origin, age,

language, and gender. In addition, these workers should answer the following key questions:

- Where do international WHMs usually stay in the Niseko area, and how long do they stay?
- What kinds of jobs do WHMs get, and how much do they earn and spend during the WH program?
- Do they transition into longer-term stays by obtaining a work visa?

In addition, these visitors' motivations should be thoroughly explored.

Issues and problems that international WHMs face in Niseko

Future research should also examine any issues faced by international WHMs related to the Niseko area or their experiences within the WHM program in general. Previous studies have revealed obstacles faced by international WHMs in Australia and New Zealand (e.g., Fujioka, 2013; Kawashima, 2010; Oishi, 2020; Opara, 2018). Questions to be addressed include the following:

- What, if any, difficulties, or issues arise for WHMs in Niseko?
- Do WHMs experience exploitation and unfair treatment in the resorts?
- Do these WHMs endure poor living and working conditions during the program?

These inquiries will help researchers better understand Niseko's international WHMs. The above questions can guide studies of WHMs in Japan in preparation for the tourism and hospitality industry's revival once the COVID-19 pandemic has dissipated.

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