

Chronic First Aid: The Scheme for the Movement of Filipino Nurses under the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA), 2009–2016

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Abstract

This article surveys the trajectory of the problematic implementation of, and later amendments to, the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA)'s Movement of Natural Persons provisions between 2009 and 2016, with reference to the Japan-Indonesia Economic Partnership Agreement (JIEPA) and the Japan-Vietnam Economic Partnership Agreement (JVEPA). It draws on official documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan (MHLW), Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services (JICWELS), and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), among others, as well as a structured survey conducted among the Japanese employers who accepted the first batch of Filipino EPA nurse candidates in 2011, a year after the deployment of Filipino nurses. The study is based on formal and informal interviews since the early 200s with the government officers of the pertaining countries, EPA nurse candidates, and Japanese language education experts. In addition, the paper refers to the recently introduced English proficiency standard for foreign nurse applicants in Australia to reflect on Japanese language requirements in the EPA-MNP

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scheme. This study identified the learning of the Japanese language — and the difficulties thereof — as a key element of the scheme, and shows that a series of merely short-term amendments have been made to address the issues. The article concludes by suggesting a more systematic management of the EPA-MNP scheme, especially in matters concerning Japanese language training.

Keywords: JPEPA, Filipino nurse migration, migration policy of Japan, movement of natural persons, Japanese language for foreign workers

Introduction

By the end of 2016, Japan will have established fifteen economic partnership agreements (EPAs) and one free trade agreement (FTA). Generally speaking, EPAs promote free trade and other areas of economic cooperation, such as investment and the protection of intellectual property rights. Japan has signed ten EPAs with Asian countries. These include the Philippines (Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement, or JPEPA, 2006), Indonesia (Japan-Indonesia Economic Partnership Agreement, or JIEPA, 2007) and Vietnam (Japan-Vietnam Economic Partnership Agreement, or JVEPA, 2008). All these EPAs are considered historically remarkable for the provisions on the “movement of natural persons” (MNP). Through the MNP scheme, qualified nurses and careworkers from counterpart countries can work in Japan under designated conditions.¹ In the early 2000s, mere news of the possible opening of Japan’s labor market in health and care service under EPA was received with excitement by the sending countries. In diplomatic negotiations for the EPA, both Philippine and Indonesian governments expected that the EPA would provide their health-related workers an opportunity to work in Japan, one of the most graying countries in the world.² Indeed, both the Philippines and Indonesia strongly demanded that the EPA include provisions that would facilitate the mobility of their health care workers to Japan.³ With these EPAs, Japan de facto opened its labor market in nursing and caregiving to foreigners, while meticulously controlling the scheme