

What Is Driving the Growth of the JLPT in Japan?

Exam Fees, Application Structure, and the Surge in N4 Applications, 2019-2025

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Abstract

This paper examines the long-run expansion of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), with particular attention to the rapid growth of N4 applications at test sites in Japan after the COVID-19 pandemic. Official JLPT statistics show that global applications rose from 7,998 in 1984 to 1,940,852 in 2025. Within Japan, annual applications increased from 479,879 in 2019 to 799,055 in 2025, while the domestic test fee rose from ¥5,500 to ¥7,500. The most striking structural change is at N4: annual N4 applications in Japan increased from 56,512 to 172,085, a 204.5% rise. The paper evaluates three plausible explanations - growth in Japan's foreign resident population, changes in Japanese-language institute enrollment, and the institutional value of N4 under the Specified Skilled Worker system. The evidence supports a structural-demand interpretation but does not establish a single causal driver.

Keywords: JLPT; N4; Japanese-language education; foreign residents; Specified Skilled Worker; test demand

Key findings

1.94M	Global JLPT applications reached 1,940,852 in 2025, about 243 times the 1984 level.
+66.5%	Applications at Japan test sites rose from 479,879 in 2019 to 799,055 in 2025.
+204.5%	N4 applications in Japan rose from 56,512 in 2019 to 172,085 in 2025.
¥7,500	The domestic test fee increased by 36.4% from ¥5,500 in 2019 to ¥7,500 from 2023 onward.
+40.6%	Japan's foreign resident population increased from 2.93 million at end-2019 to 4.13 million at end-2025.

1. Introduction

The JLPT is often discussed as if it were a single, steadily expanding examination market. The aggregate numbers support the idea of long-run expansion, but they conceal an important structural change. Recent growth at Japanese test sites has not been evenly distributed across proficiency levels. N3 and, especially, N4 have expanded much faster than N1 and N5.

This matters because different JLPT levels can represent different forms of demand. N1 and N2 are often associated with advanced academic or professional proficiency. N4 occupies a different position: it is both a basic proficiency benchmark and, in several policy contexts, a recognized threshold with practical value. Understanding the N4 surge therefore provides a more informative view of the changing role of Japanese-language certification than simply counting total applicants.

This paper asks three questions: (1) How has JLPT demand changed over the long run and in Japan since 2019? (2) Is the recent expansion concentrated in particular proficiency levels? (3) Which demographic and institutional changes are consistent with the unusually rapid growth of N4?

2. Data and methodology

The analysis uses official sources from the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services (JLPT statistics), Japan Educational Exchanges and Services (domestic test fees and operational reports), the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (foreign residents and Specified Skilled Worker statistics), and the Japan Student Services Organization (international students in Japanese-language institutes).

For Japan-based JLPT figures, annual applications are calculated by summing the July and December applicant counts published by the official JLPT site. These are application instances rather than a verified count of unique individuals: a person who applies twice in one year can appear twice in the annual total. The July 2020 JLPT was cancelled worldwide, so 2020 is treated as an exceptional, non-comparable year.

The study is descriptive. It compares trends and institutional timing, but it does not use individual-level applicant data. Accordingly, the paper distinguishes verified statistical facts from supported interpretations and avoids treating correlation as proof of causality.

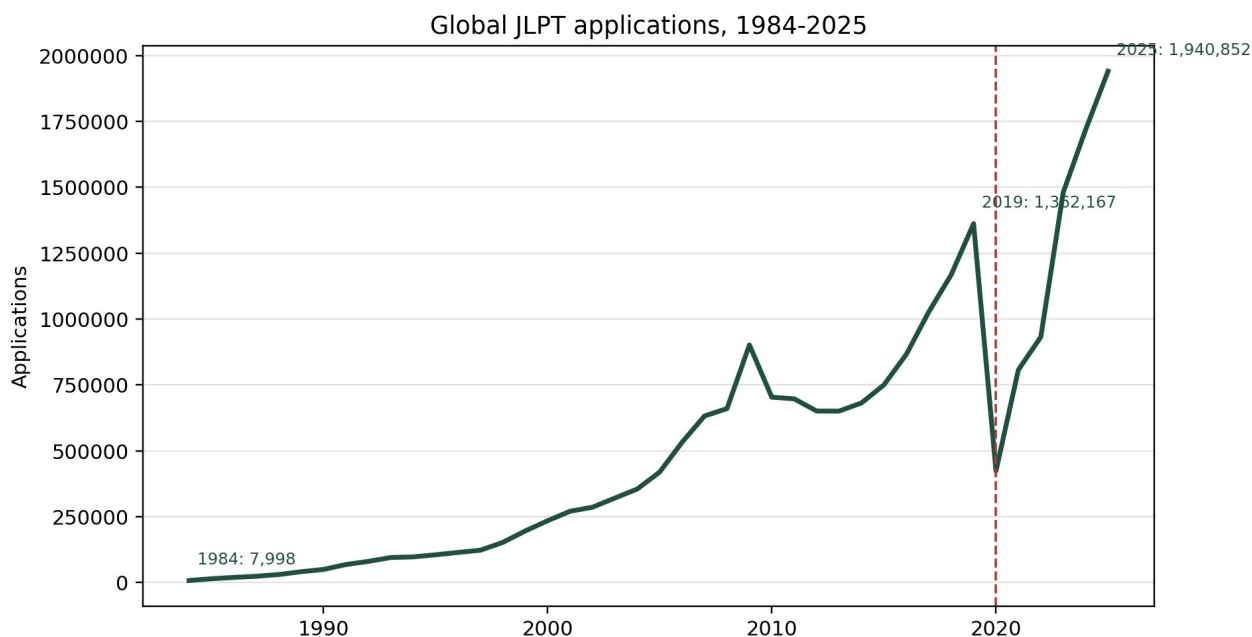


Figure 1. Global JLPT applications, 1984-2025

Source: Official JLPT Past Test Data. The July 2020 test was cancelled worldwide.

3. Four decades of expansion

The long-run transformation of the JLPT is substantial. Official statistics report 7,998 applicants in 1984 and 1,940,852 in 2025. The 2025 level is approximately 243 times the inaugural-year count. Even relative to the pre-pandemic peak of 1,362,167 applications in 2019, the 2025 total is 42.5% higher.

The pandemic created a sharp break in the series. Only the December session was held in 2020, and international mobility remained constrained in 2021 and parts of 2022. The more relevant post-pandemic signal is the acceleration from 932,518 global applications in 2022 to 1,481,023 in 2023, 1,718,943 in 2024 and 1,940,852 in 2025. The JLPT therefore not only recovered; it moved materially above its 2019 scale.

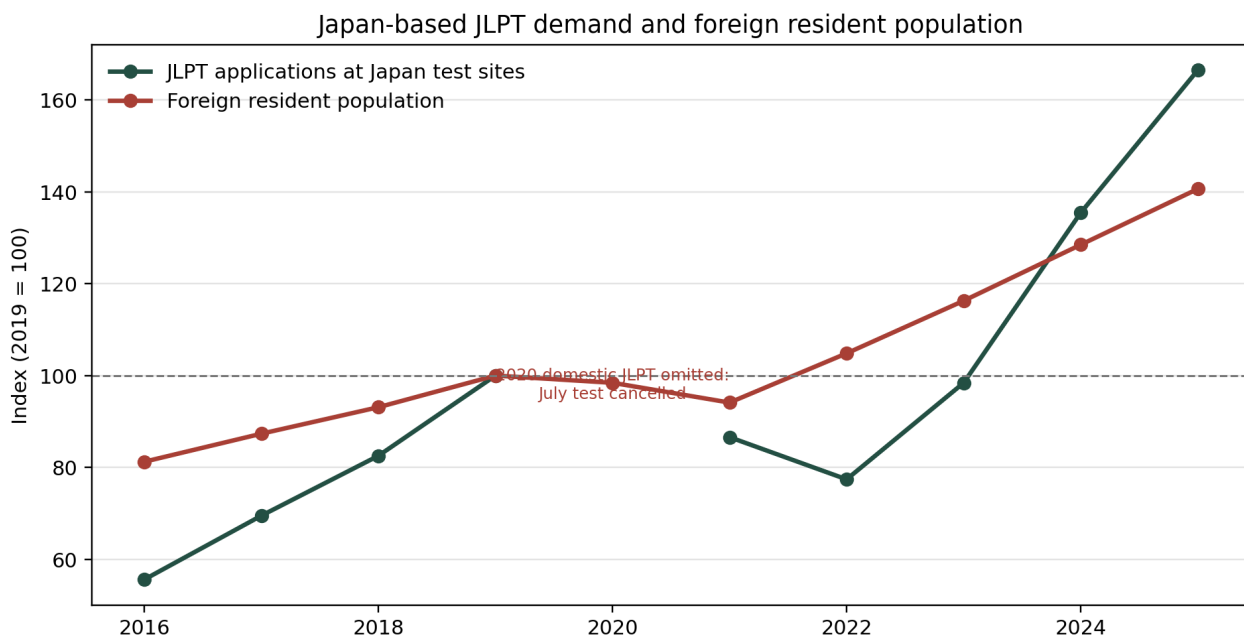


Figure 2. Japan-based JLPT applications and the foreign resident population (2019 = 100)

Sources: Official JLPT statistics; Immigration Services Agency of Japan. Domestic JLPT 2020 is omitted from the line because only one session was held.

4. Japan is growing faster than its foreign resident population

Applications at Japanese test sites increased from 479,879 in 2019 to 799,055 in 2025, a 66.5% rise. Over the same period, Japan's foreign resident population increased from 2,933,137 to 4,125,395, or 40.6%. The two trends clearly move in the same broad direction after the pandemic, but JLPT applications grew faster than the underlying foreign resident population.

This comparison should not be interpreted as a participation rate. JLPT annual figures count applications, whereas the immigration statistics count residents at a point in time. Not every applicant at a Japan test site is necessarily represented in the year-end foreign resident stock, and some residents may apply twice in a calendar year. The useful inference is narrower: population growth alone is unlikely to be a complete explanation for the scale of the increase in JLPT applications.

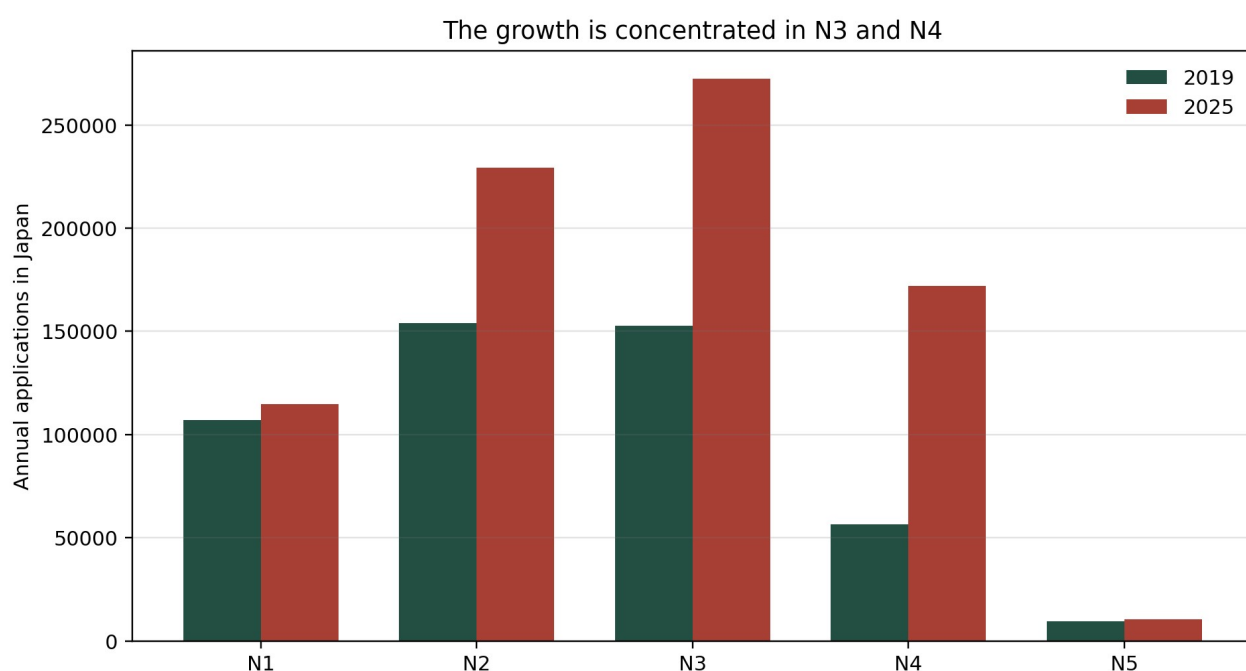


Figure 3. Annual JLPT applications in Japan by level: 2019 vs. 2025

Source: Official JLPT July and December statistics; annual totals calculated by Vibepapa Research.

5. The central finding: N4 is the outlier

Level	2019	2025	Growth	2019 share	2025 share
N1	106,878	114,863	7.5%	22.3%	14.4%
N2	154,122	229,320	48.8%	32.1%	28.7%
N3	152,827	272,317	78.2%	31.8%	34.1%
N4	56,512	172,085	204.5%	11.8%	21.5%
N5	9,540	10,470	9.7%	2.0%	1.3%

The level-by-level comparison changes the interpretation of the market. N1 increased by only 7.5% between 2019 and 2025, and N5 by 9.7%. N2 rose 48.8% and N3 78.2%. N4, however, rose 204.5%, from 56,512 to 172,085 annual applications.

N4 also became much more important within the domestic level mix. Its share of applications increased from 11.8% in 2019 to 21.5% in 2025. This is not a one-year statistical anomaly. N4 applications in Japan were 59,189 in 2022, 90,570 in 2023, 147,848 in 2024 and 172,085 in 2025. JEES itself noted in its FY2024 business report that N3 and N4 applications had increased markedly.

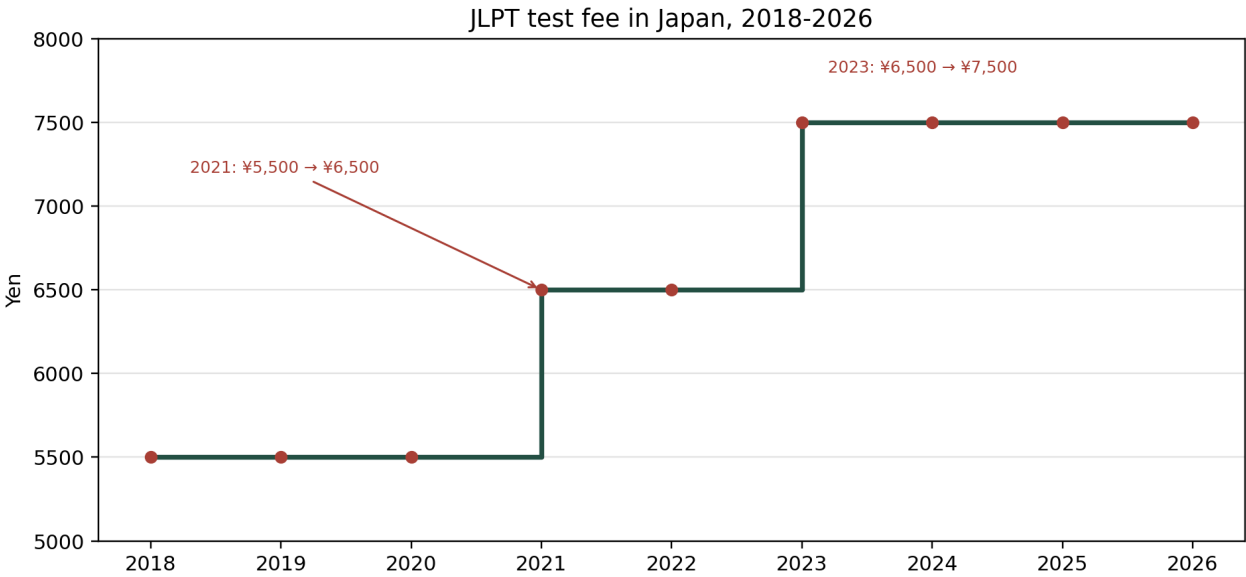


Figure 4. Domestic JLPT test fee, 2018-2026

Sources: JEES annual reports, implementation guidelines and current application information.

6. Higher fees did not stop aggregate demand growth

The domestic JLPT fee was ¥5,500 in 2019 and 2020. JEES raised it to ¥6,500 in 2021, citing additional costs related to infection-prevention measures, venue acquisition and operations. In 2023 the fee rose again to ¥7,500 because of expected increases in venue rental and operational outsourcing costs. The fee remains ¥7,500 in 2026.

From 2019 to 2025, the nominal fee therefore increased by 36.4%, while Japan-based applications increased by 66.5%. This observation is important but should not be described as an estimate of price elasticity. Numerous demand-side factors changed at the same time, including border reopening, the number and composition of foreign residents, student inflows and labor-migration pathways. The defensible conclusion is simply that the fee increases did not overwhelm the broader growth in demand.

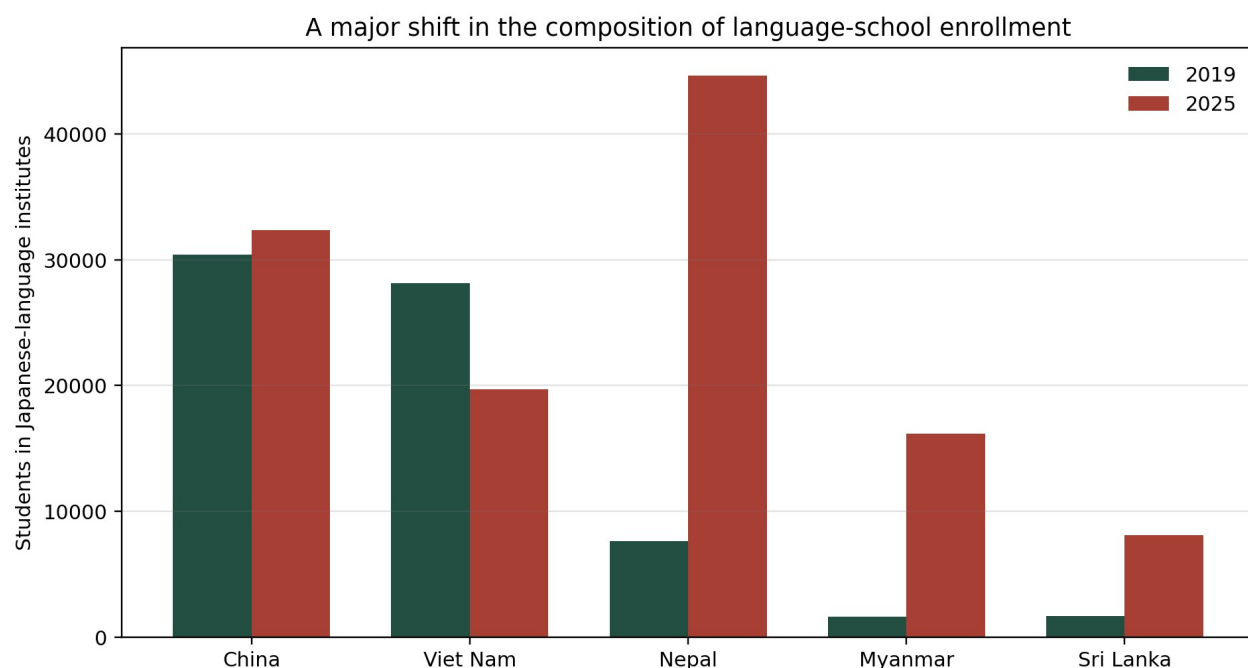


Figure 5. Selected nationalities in Japanese-language institutes, 2019 vs. 2025

Source: JASSO International Student Surveys, 2019 and 2025. Selected nationalities shown for comparability.

7. A changing language-school population

JASSO reports that enrollment in Japanese-language institutes rose from 83,811 students in 2019 to 140,174 in 2025, an increase of 67.3%. This is strikingly close to the 66.5% growth in Japan-based JLPT applications over the same endpoints, although the two statistics use different dates and populations and should not be equated.

The composition of language-school enrollment changed even more dramatically. In 2019, China and Viet Nam together accounted for roughly 70% of language-institute students. By 2025, Nepal was the largest origin country with 44,632 students (31.8%), followed by China with 32,364, Viet Nam with 19,686, Myanmar with 16,165 and Sri Lanka with 8,090. The rapid increases from Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka are consistent with a larger pool of learners for whom basic-to-intermediate certification may have immediate educational or employment value.

However, the JLPT does not publish a nationality breakdown for Japan-based N4 applicants. It is therefore not possible to demonstrate from public data that any one nationality caused the N4 surge. The language-school shift is best treated as contextual evidence rather than direct attribution.

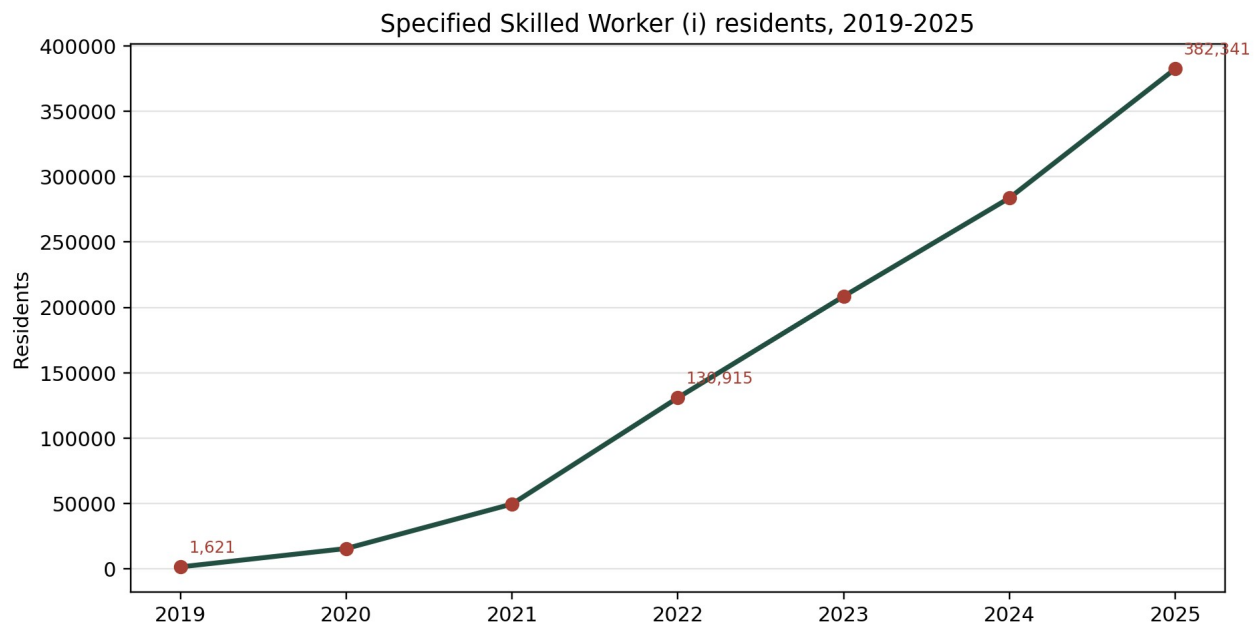


Figure 6. Specified Skilled Worker (i) residents, 2019-2025

Source: Immigration Services Agency of Japan. Year-end counts.

8. N4 gained institutional value in the labor market

Japan introduced the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) status of residence in April 2019. For SSW (i), applicants generally need to pass a sector skills test and demonstrate Japanese ability through either JFT-Basic or JLPT N4 or higher. The official support site also notes important exemptions, particularly for people who have satisfactorily completed Technical Intern Training (ii). Some fields now require N3 for particular occupations.

The SSW (i) resident population expanded from 1,621 at the end of 2019 to 382,341 at the end of 2025. This does not mean that those residents took the N4, nor that the SSW system mechanically produced 380,000 additional N4 candidates. JFT-Basic is an alternative, and exempt technical-intern transitions can bypass the language-test requirement. Nevertheless, the policy gives N4 a clearly recognized labor-market function that N5 does not have under the general SSW (i) language standard.

The contrast between N4 and N5 is therefore analytically useful. If the post-2019 increase were only a general influx of beginners, one might expect both levels to grow strongly. Instead, N5 applications increased only 9.7% while N4 more than tripled. This pattern is consistent with - though it does not prove - a shift toward a minimum credential with practical institutional value.

9. What the evidence can and cannot support

Evidence level	Claim	Assessment
Confirmed	N4 applications in Japan rose from 56,512 in 2019 to 172,085 in 2025.	Directly supported by official JLPT statistics.
Confirmed	Foreign residents, language-school enrollment and SSW residents all increased substantially.	Directly supported by ISA and JASSO statistics.
Supported interpretation	Japan-based JLPT growth reflects more than simple population growth.	JLPT applications rose faster than the foreign resident stock; composition also shifted.
Supported interpretation	N4 has gained practical value as a minimum recognized credential in some labor pathways.	The SSW (i) framework explicitly accepts JLPT N4 or higher as one language route.
Not established	The SSW program or a particular nationality caused the N4 surge.	Public JLPT data do not link Japan-based applicants by level to nationality, visa status or motivation.

10. Conclusion

The strongest result of this study is not simply that the JLPT is getting larger. The composition of demand in Japan is changing. From 2019 to 2025, N4 applications increased by 204.5% and their share of all Japan-based applications nearly doubled. N3 also grew strongly, while N1 and N5 were comparatively stable.

Three developments align with this shift: the record expansion of Japan's foreign resident population, the post-pandemic growth and changing nationality mix of Japanese-language institutes, and the institutional role of N4 as an accepted language benchmark in the Specified Skilled Worker system. At the same time, test fees increased from ¥5,500 to ¥7,500 without preventing aggregate application growth.

The evidence therefore points to a structural transformation in JLPT demand: in Japan, the examination is increasingly intertwined with education, migration and labor-market pathways, not only advanced language study. The N4 surge is a measurable signal of that transformation. A definitive causal explanation, however, would require applicant-level data on nationality, residence status, occupation and test motivation that are not publicly available.

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Research note: Calculations and charts by Vibepapa Research from the official sources above. All percentage changes are rounded to one decimal place.