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Letter From Mie

Mie Prefecture leads Japan in push for diversity, barrier-free access

The prefecture boasts a support ecosystem that champions efforts to promote inclusivity.



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Mie is known for hosting the Formula One (F-1) Japan Grand Prix in the city of Suzuka, which has helped to create jobs in the automobile manufacturing sector for a migrant workforce. Many live in the neighbouring city of Yokkaichi, where the district of Sasakawa is a Brazilian enclave. There, public signs are posted in Japanese and Portuguese while there are Brazilian supermarkets and restaurants to give migrants a taste of home. As many as one in five residents is a foreigner, mainly from Brazil but also other Latin American countries.



The district of Sasakawa in the city of Yokkaichi, Mie Prefecture, is home to a large population of Brazilians who largely have found work in auto manufacturing. ST PHOTO: WALTER SIM

Many came after immigration laws were revised in 1990 to provide South Americans of Japanese ancestry with preferential working visa status. The population subsequently grew through word of mouth, and many ended up putting down roots.

These measures are especially pertinent given Japan's rapidly ageing society, which means more people may be less mobile in the years to come. One strategy that has been mooted to ensure the vitality of Japan's economy is immigration, which means Yokkaichi's multicultural example might be worth studying in the years to come.

At the Yokkaichi City Nishi Sasagawa Junior High School, about 40 per cent of its 229 students were born overseas, hailing from countries like Brazil, Bolivia and the Philippines.

Student Gabriel Yoshimura, 14, said that he could not speak any Japanese when he came from Brazil when he was nine.



Members of the student council and multicultural existence club at the Yokkaichi City Nishi Sasagawa Junior High School pose for a photograph. ST PHOTO: WALTER SIM

"I felt embarrassed about conversing in Japanese because I didn't want people to laugh at me, but it soon occurred to me that it doesn't really matter if I made a mistake," he said of the challenges he faced.

But his schoolmate Yuya Monte, 14, who is with the student council, said: "For us, we have had foreign friends since nursery. I think it is normal to have non-Japanese peers, some of whom speak even better Japanese than we do."