



An Opinion Survey on University Students' Perception of Study Abroad Programs

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This study examines 51 first year university students' perception of study abroad programs (hereafter SAPs) in a national university in a rural area in Japan. Aiming to assist SAP coordinators design programs, the study focused on a short-term program at university level and employed a mixed method based on the results of an online questionnaire and open-ended questions. Results suggest that the samples prefer onsite to online programs (SAPs). The students believe that SAPs provide holistic experience, such exposure to the local environment, which has significant and direct impacts on their learning. Some students also report that investing on onsite SAPs is an asset after graduation. However, financial concerns seem to be an issue. It was suggested establishing a combination of onsite and online SAP, provision of external funding, and establishing SAPs with Asian countries would lighten the financial burden.

本研究は、地方の国立大学における留学プログラム(SAP)に対する大学1年生51名の考え方を調査したものである。今後の留学プログラム設計の一助となるよう大学レベルの短期プログラムに焦点を当て、オンラインアンケートを量的および質的に分析した。その結果、大学1年生はオンラインよりも渡航型プログラムを好むことが明らかになった。その理由は、現地の環境に触れるなど総合的な経験をすることが重要であり、直接学ぶことが学びに直結すると考えているからである。渡航型プログラムへの投資は卒業後の財産となると考えている学生もいる。一方、経済的な懸念が課題であることも分かった。費用負担を軽くするために、渡航型とオンラインの組み合わせや外部資金調達、アジア諸国でのプログラム開発などが提案された。

Shimmi et al. (2021) reported that universities in Japan have offered various types of online learning opportunities alongside study abroad programs (SAPs), especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online SAPs made participation in conventional SAPs easy for students with personal or financial difficulty in obtaining international education (Ikeda, 2023; Pouromid, 2023; Quan et al., 2023). International education online takes several forms, such as regular video meetings on Zoom or learning platforms, virtual exchange (VE), virtual mobility (VM), collaborative online international learning (COIL), or blended learning (BL) (Ikeda, 2023; Shimmi et al., 2021).

Japanese universities resumed onsite SAPs since 2022 (Hayashi et al., 2023; Shoji & Matsuoka, 2023; Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024) while expenses for SAPs have increased due to soaring prices and the weak yen (Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024). Given this situation, investigating how to establish and expand practical SAPs that benefits students most is essential based on students' opinions and beliefs. This study aims to assist SAP coordinators practically design, develop, and expand SAPs by presenting students' opinions and beliefs on SAP.

Literature Review

Current State of Short-Term Study Abroad Programs in Japan

Recently, Japanese universities are more likely to provide onsite programs that last for two to four weeks during summer or spring breaks (Hayashi et al., 2023; Shoji & Matsuoka, 2023) including pre-departure learning and post-training (Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024). This period covers the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2022) standard requirement of 45 hours and 90 hours, for 1 credit and 2 credits, respectively for SA participation (Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024). In addition, this duration is appropriate for faculty members who accompany students (Gaia, 2015).

Students are usually sent to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or the United Kingdom (Hayashi et al., 2023; Shindo, 2023; Shoji & Matsuoka, 2023). Cost for participation is high causing students to refrain from participating (Ito, 2020; Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024). To solve the financial issue, onsite SAPs to Asian countries were suggested to reduce expense (Ito, 2020; Sato & Kashiwazaki, 2022; Shindo, 2023). Several Japanese universities have SAPs in Asian countries, such as Korea (Kobayashi, 2013), China (Shioya, 2017), Taiwan (Yabuta, 2014; Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024), Vietnam (Matsuoka & Okuda, 2023), Malaysia (Ito, 2020; Sato & Kashiwazaki, 2022), and the Philippines (Ito, 2020; Sato & Kashiwazaki, 2022). In addition to reducing cost, SAPs in Asian countries provide students with opportunities to interact with local students who, like themselves, also learn English as a second or foreign language (Ito, 2020; Sato & Kashiwazaki, 2022).

On the other hand, online SAPs are more accessible and cost less (Yoshikubo et al., 2023). As of February 2021, there were a variety of online programs from as short as one week to a semester long (Shimmi et al., 2021). Students can participate in short-term programs provided by foreign universities where they can learn a foreign language and local culture or join customized programs in collaboration with a foreign university where both Japanese students and foreign students join in discussions (Shimmi et al., 2021). Based on the major form of online SAPs in Shimmi et al. (2021), this study defines online study abroad (SA) as learning and exchange through interactive video meetings and does not include on-demand lessons where students cannot interact in real time nor metaverse where students cannot see real reactions.

Benefits of Study Abroad Programs

Previous studies reported several advantages of onsite SAPs. Through an onsite SAP, students can improve communication skills (Hayashi et al., 2023; Yabuta, 2014), language skills (Ito, 2020; Kobayashi, 2013), and intercultural understanding (Hayashi et al., 2023; Shioya, 2017). In addition, students reported experiencing personal growth by actively expressing their opinions (Shoraku, 2014) and by dealing with unfamiliar situations (Hayashi et al., 2023) during a program. Moreover, students are motivated to learn a foreign language (Nishina et al., 2017) and their expertise (Shoraku, 2014) even after a program.

On the other hand, previous studies have also demonstrated the great impact that online SAPs bring. First, it can result in students being globally minded through intercultural understanding (Deacon & Miles, 2022) and increase their awareness of the

importance of initiative and positivity (Liu & Shirley, 2021; Nakaya, 2022). In addition, Nakaya (2022) conducted interviews with students participating in online SAPs and found that online programs exerted positive effects on students, similar to the effects of onsite SAPs. Nakaya also reported that by joining with international students during a program, Japanese students could relate to global issues from different perspectives and could positively express themselves.

Attitudes of Students Toward Study Abroad Programs

Previous studies show that the number of students who prefer online programs in a private university is almost equal to the number of students who opted for onsite programs (Ishiyama, 2022). Students prefer an onsite SAP because it improves their language skills (Hayashi et al., 2023; Shoraku, 2014) and provides learning related to their expertise (Hayashi et al., 2023) especially in a different context from Japan (Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024) and experiences which students cannot have in Japan, such as homestay (Hayashi et al., 2023). Students believe they acquire a new value and perspective by interacting with diverse people and observing various things through an onsite SAP (Yoshida & Matsumoto, 2024).

Similarly, students prefer an online SAP because they like to improve language skills, communicate with people outside of Japan, and to learn about themes on which each program focuses (Deacon & Miles, 2022). In addition, students can participate in an online SAP even if they are engaged in other activities, such as other academic courses (Yoshikubo et al., 2023), part-time jobs, and clubs (Ishiyama, 2022). Ishiyama (2022) argues that online programs are not only a substitute but also a new feasible option for students who cannot undertake SAPs due to time or financial constraints. However, Iwaki and Tatsumi (2021) reported that 71.5% (151 out of 211) of the students mentioned that they can improve language skills through activities in online courses, while 89.6% (189 out of 211) cited that a large gap exists in the entire experience between online and onsite programs. Alternatively, a number of students supported collaborative learning with international students in Japan instead of online SAPs, because they can actively interact in-person with diverse people (Iwaki & Tatsumi, 2021).

Thus, three- to four-week programs onsite are often provided in Japanese universities but the financial aspect remains an issue of onsite SAPs. On the other hand, online programs have been developed and have positive impacts, but students see a gap between online and onsite programs. Studies focused on opinions and beliefs of first-year university students toward SAPs in a national university in a rural area in Japan, remain few.

Research Questions

In an attempt to assist program developers and SAP coordinators design practical SAPs that are practical and meaningful for students and improve relevant programs, this research aims to: (1) explore the opinions of first-year university students on SAPs, and (2) examine the reasons for such opinions.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 51 Japanese first-year university students majoring in interdisciplinary science in a national university in a rural area in Japan. Before participating, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, of free choice, and that the results would be used only for research purposes. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using an online survey tool, Google Forms, at the end of a study abroad guidance in October 2023. This study, focusing on short-term SAPs at the university level, used data collected from a questionnaire as well as qualitative data. The questionnaire, consisting of nine questions, was created by the authors based on discussions with staff in charge of SAPs at the authors' university. The questionnaire was conducted in Japanese, the native language of the participants. Four multiple-choice questions asked students' opinions including preferred type, length of program, overseas place of study, and contents of SAP. Five open-ended questions asked reasons of the choice and a free description on SAPs. For the analysis of the qualitative data, each participant was randomly assigned a number with "P" (participant) to identify individual responses.

Results

Student Preferences in Study Abroad Programs

Table 1 reports responses on which type of SA programs students would like to participate in, while Table 2 shows the preferred contents of the preferred program. Table 1 shows 100% (all) of the participants would like to participate in onsite SAPs instead of online ones.

Table 1

Preferred Type of Study Abroad Programs

<i>Q1. Which type of study abroad program do you like to participate in?</i>	
Onsite programs	100%
Online programs	0%

Note. N = 51.

Table 2

Preferred Contents of Study Abroad Programs

<i>Q2. What do you think is important about the study abroad program?</i>	
Lessons to improve language skills	26.7%
Chance to interact with local students	24.2%
Chance to learn culture and history in the country/region	15.5%
Chance to learn local life through home staying	14.3%
Chance to study with students from other countries	10.6%
Lessons to improve skills for a presentation or discussion	6.2%
Lessons to learn major subjects	2.5%

Note. Multiple responses allowed. Total responses = 161.

To the question about the contents of SA programs, students were allowed to choose up to three responses for implementation purposes. Table 2 shows that 26.7% and 24.2% of the students prefer programs with language content and programs that provide opportunities for interaction with local students, respectively. In contrast, the participants prefer less programs that provide practice for presentation or discussions (6.2%) and those that assist learning major subjects (2.5%).

Table 3 and 4 report students' preference for length of overseas study and place of study, respectively.

Table 3
Preferred Duration of Study Abroad Programs

Q3. What is your preferred length of program for overseas study?	
1 week (7 days)	3.9%
10 days	3.9%
2 weeks (14 days)	13.7%
3 weeks	25.5%
4 weeks (1 month)	25.5%
6 weeks	3.9%
2 months	21.6%
No response	2.0%

Note. $N = 51$.

Table 4
Preferred Place of Study Overseas

Q4. Which places overseas would you like to study?	
North America	37.3%
Europe	25.5%
Oceania	21.6%
Southeast Asia/South Asia	3.9%
No response	11.8%

Note. $N = 51$.

Table 3 shows that the same number of students, 25.5%, prefer three weeks and four weeks. The common reason given is that this length is neither extremely short nor long; alternatively, SAP cannot be longer than three or four weeks due to club activities or part-time jobs. On the other hand, 11 out of 51 students (21.6%) prefer two months, the reason being, the longer the time spent abroad, the better. Several students who prefer two months say that this length of time is necessary to obtain a realistic picture of the

local area or to establish friendly relations. Interestingly two students preferred one week and cited that they must reduce the burden on costs as much as possible.

Regarding the preferred place of overseas study, Table 4 shows that 37.3% of the students prefer North America, 25.5% Europe, while 21.6% chose Oceania as the desirable destination. Interestingly, more than eleven percent (11.8%) did not answer this question although other options, such as West Asia/Middle Asia/South Asia, South America, and Africa, were provided.

Student Beliefs about Studying Abroad

A total of 44 comments were given in support of question 2, "Please tell us the reason(s) for your answer in Q1." Three themes were identified: holistic experience, firsthand learning, and investment mindset, and student responses to the open-ended questions were coded and categorized as belonging to each theme. Table 5 presents the statements of belief extracted from student responses corresponding to these themes.

Table 5
Student Beliefs about Studying Abroad Categorized into Themes

Theme	Extracted Belief
Holistic experience	Traveling and staying overseas is significant in and of itself.
	It is essential to experience being exposed to the local environment.
Firsthand learning	Direct contact to local culture and people exerts major impacts on learning.
	You should see, think, and make actions in a real context.
Investment mindset	Experience from an onsite program can be useful after graduation.
	You may as well go abroad if paying anyway.

Among 44 comments given by participants, 22 comments were categorized in holistic experience, 20 comments were categorized in firsthand learning, and 8 comments in investment mindset. Some comments were categorized in more than one theme. For example, the comment of P41 below is categorized in both holistic experience and investment mindset.

I believe that the experience of actually coming into contact with local culture and interacting directly with people will be helpful when I become a full-fledged member of a society. (P41)

This student believes studying abroad offers a whole experience of contact with local culture and people. This was categorized as holistic experience. In addition, the later part suggests that she/he believes the experience will be helpful when she/he becomes a member of a society, making it fit to be categorized into an investment mindset.

The first theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis is holistic experience. Twenty-two comments had this concept in common. Table 6 displays the students' responses and the underlying beliefs.

Table 6
Student Responses Corresponding to Holistic Experience of Studying Abroad

Underlying Belief	Student Response
Traveling and staying overseas is significant in and of itself.	"Because we think it is meaningful to actually go there" (P17)
	"Because the experience of living abroad is the main purpose of going to study abroad" (P35)
It is essential to experience being exposed to the local environment.	"I think there are experiences that can only be gained by actually going there." (P1)
	"Because I would like to be exposed to that environment" (P6)
	"To actually experience the culture and feel the atmosphere of a foreign country" (P9)
	"Because I think there are things you can only feel there" (P18)
	"Because you can experience the local atmosphere" (P28)
	"Because I would like to actually experience the local people, culture, language and lifestyle" (P34)
	"I want to experience the local atmosphere." (P51)

Eight participants believe that traveling and staying abroad is significant in and of itself. In addition, 14 participants think it is important to have experience of being exposed to the local environment and that is something a SAP should provide.

Twenty comments were extracted from the underlying theme on firsthand learning.

Table 7
Student Responses Corresponding to Firsthand Experience in Studying Abroad

Underlying Belief	Student Response
Direct contact to local culture and people exerts major impacts on learning.	"To actually experience the English language in the city, etc." (P19)
	"Because I want to learn by direct contact with the culture and people" (P32)
You should see, think, and make actions in a real context.	"Because there is some information that can be obtained by using each of the five senses" (P39)
	"A picture is worth a thousand words." (P2)
	"Because I can see what I want to see with my own eyes, not just the information given to me" (P11)
	"Because you can learn in a practical way" (P29)

Table 7 shows that for the participants, direct contact to local culture and people during onsite SAPs exerts major impacts on learning. They prefer to experience things directly by themselves, think on their own, and make active decisions in real contexts instead of merely receiving information given to them.

The last theme, investment mindset, was observed in eight student comments, shown in Table 8.

Table 8
Student Responses Corresponding to Investment Mindset of Studying Abroad

Underlying Belief	Student Response
Experience from an onsite program can be useful after graduation.	"I believe that the experience of actually coming into contact with local culture and interacting directly with people will be helpful when I become a full-fledged member of a society." (P41)
You may as well go abroad if paying anyway.	"Because I want to study in a completely non-Japanese environment if I take part in a study abroad program" (P13) "Since I have an opportunity to study abroad, I would like to go there and experience a variety of things, not just improve my language skills online." (P40) "Rather than spending money on an online course, I thought it would be a much better experience for me to experience a local area firsthand." (P50)

Table 8 shows that students consider the experience of studying abroad as an asset, especially useful for life after graduation. Others perceive that studying abroad is similar to an investment in themselves. In other words, they may as well go abroad, because "you pay for study abroad programs and do not want to stay in Japan even though you could also improve language skills online" (P40 & P50).

Financial Concerns

The final item in the survey asked for additional comments regarding students' problems, concerns, and messages related to studying abroad. Fifteen participants shared concerns, which were sorted into three components, namely: concerns related to finance (n = 9), language level (n = 4), and appropriate time for job hunting and graduation (n = 3). A few students shared more than one concern; each was counted in one of the three contents. Examples of concerns extracted from the students' comments are shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9
Concerns Detected from Students' Comments

Underlying Concern	Student Comment
Finance	"I would like to participate in a study abroad program, but I have no money. Since I cannot expect any support from my parents, I would like to expand my scholarship. Under the current circumstances, I have no choice but to give up participating." (P22) "I am a little reluctant to participate in a study abroad program because of the high cost involved." (P41)
Language level	"I am worried that my language skills will not be good enough as it is." (P35) "I am not nearly confident that I can spend time abroad alone, as I am quite poor in English." (P4)
Timing for job hunting and graduation	"There is job hunting, and I am worried there is no leave of absence from school" (P12) "I am not sure between online study abroad and short-term study abroad because I feel that with my ability, short-term study abroad would interfere with my study for certification and graduation." (P37)

Notably, 60.0% (9 out of 15) of the students who shared their concerns expressed financial concerns. Some students prefer to invest in studying abroad (Table 8); however, a few participants shared that they preferred short-term programs, because they cost less.

Discussion

Issues in Current Study Abroad Programs

Unlike previous findings, all the participants in this study prefer onsite SAP to online SAP. 51.0% (26 out of 51) of the students consider three to four weeks as an appropriate length for onsite SAPs, considering school club activities or part-time jobs. This preferred length of time is aligned with findings in previous studies (Hayashi et al., 2023; Sato & Kashiwazaki, 2022; Shoji & Matsuoka, 2023). Similar to the earlier findings of Ito (2020)

and Yoshida and Matsumoto (2024), students in this study expressed financial concerns strongly affecting their plans to study abroad.

Compared to online SAPs, onsite programs are more expensive. In spite of this, however, the current study revealed that students still prefer to join onsite SAP. The reasons include students believe the importance of learning firsthand, being exposed to the local environment, and having direct contact with local people which online SAPs cannot offer.

Although previous studies show that online SAPs also provide contact with local students (Liu & Shirley, 2021; Nago, 2021), provide opportunities for firsthand discussions and collaborative projects (Ikeda, 2023; Shimmi et al., 2021), and improve students' language skills (Iwaki & Tatsumi, 2021), these are not widely recognized (Nakaya, 2022), so students may not know much about their benefit.

Suggestion to Lighten Expense of SAP

Results of this study suggest that joining onsite SAPs cost a lot. To lighten the financial burden of overseas study, this study suggests the following: a combination of onsite SAP and online SAP, external funding, and development of SAPs in Asian countries. An example would be: Japanese students could take several classes in video meetings where they learn local history and culture from local students from a university which they can visit afterward for a short time of one week. In this way, the expense of staying abroad can be lighter while keeping the required credit hours of SAP and providing opportunities to interact with local students and learn the history and culture.

Regarding fully-onsite SAPs, it is important for coordinators of any SAP at the university level to formulate agreements and offer programs that are as cost-effective as possible for students such as external funding by Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) in JASSO (2025). Since Asia is found to be less popular location, SAP coordinators should promote onsite SAPs in Asian countries by widely informing that students can save on flight fares (Ito, 2020; Sato & Kashiwazaki, 2022), and that listening and speaking skills improved regardless of where they studied (Ito, 2020).

Conclusion

This study highlights the fact that first-year university students in the national university prefer onsite SAPs to online SAPs. The major reason is that students believe that holistic experiences have a direct impact on their learning. As a result, students believe in investing on onsite SAPs as an asset after graduation. Financial concerns,

however, are an issue. Suggestions are put forward to lighten the burden of expenses. These include establishing a combination of onsite and online SAPs, agreement for external funding, and development of SAPs in Asian countries.

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Bio Data

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