

An investigation into students' expectations and perceptions for studying abroad

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Abstract

Under the Promotion of Global Human Resource Development, a funding project for universities by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) to encourage university students to foster qualifications for the global society, universities in Japan seek opportunities in having students studying abroad despite the recent trend of decline in number of students doing so. How much and how the overall decline in number of Japanese students studying abroad affects students may be context/institution specific and as for Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), what students exactly expect in studying abroad and whether the expectations are being met or not are still largely unknown. This study is an effort to reveal the unknown in order to address areas of support that teaching and advising members at KUIS can provide for the students. The results of the study show 1) students' initial expectations for study abroad focus on using the target language and experiencing a different culture, 2) study abroad meets students' expectations, 3) a shift in students' perception occurs during study abroad, and 4) students strongly value study abroad.

Introduction

In 2010, the MEXT launched a funding project for universities called the Promotion of Global Human Resource Development, aiming to encourage university students to foster qualifications to “positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan’s global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations” (The MEXT, 2010). Since then, a number of projects have been proposed to and approved by the MEXT to be set in action. The MEXT recognizes and aims to overcome the ‘inward tendency’ of Japanese younger generation with these university projects. The Faculty of

Foreign Languages at KUIS has an approved project.

The inward tendency, the tendency among Japanese students of not going or willing to go study abroad, has been mentioned in a number of recent studies in Japan. Funatsu (2012) tells, as other studies may do as well, the long and ongoing stagnation of Japanese economy has likely been pushing the decline in number of students going study abroad. In his study, students give 'economic reasons' for not going study abroad in addition to the fact that they find no interest in study abroad to begin with. The economic reasons include students' concerns on both the cost that will be incurred for a study abroad itself and the opportunity cost that may negatively impact their job-hunting opportunities and thus their lifetime earnings. The concern about the opportunity cost further leads students to feel anxious about being abroad. The trend of students trying to earn all credits required for graduation except those for their thesis by the end of their third year of study, students being pushed to engage in job-hunting from the second semester of their third year of study, and the fact that study abroad experience is no longer being seen as an advantage that unconditionally lead to a better career all seem to have led students making decision not to study abroad. Funatsu suggests giving students an opportunity to participate in a short-term bridge-program abroad in their earlier years of study can motivate students to study abroad in later years.

Economic reasons are the top reason for not going study abroad in a study conducted by the Study Abroad Student Committee at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) (2013) as well. However, in contrast to the study by Funatsu (2012), none shows concerns for the possibility of study abroad negatively impacting job-hunting opportunities. Those who are not interested in going study abroad account for only six percent of the whole respondents in the study while 90 percent shows interest in studying abroad in contrast. The results of the study show common reasons for studying abroad are to improve foreign language

ability (82% response rate), experience a different culture or live abroad (71%), broaden perspective (69%), and acquire an international way of thinking (55%).

In a recent study at KUIS, Yamaguchi concluded positively towards study abroad experience that “sojourns abroad offer excellent chances for students to find their pathways” (Yamaguchi, 2013) despite recognizing the recent trend of decline in number of Japanese students studying abroad in general.

Rational

The three studies mentioned above and other related studies together may suggest that how much and how the overall decline in number of Japanese students studying abroad affects students may be context/institution specific. One may expect students’ attitude towards study abroad at KUIS to be more similar to the case of the study conducted by the Study Abroad Student Committee (2013) than it is to that of Funatsu’s (2012), taking it into an account that KUIS is a foreign language university like TUFU. The popular aims for study abroad at TUFU do not seem to contradict with the general assumption we have on our students’ motive for study abroad at KUIS either. However, the expectation and assumption need to be addressed and confirmed. In other words, what KUIS students exactly expect in studying abroad and whether the expectations are being met or not are still largely unknown though a glance of them can be taken in Yamaguchi’s (2013) study. As the Faculty of Foreign Languages at KUIS takes part in the MEXT’s Promotion of Global Human Resource Development project with its approved project, it would be helpful for the members of KUIS to know more about our students’ beliefs and perception towards study abroad. The aim of the present study is to investigate the beliefs and perception in order to help address areas of support that teaching and advising members at KUIS can provide for the students.

Research Questions

What do KUIS students expect in study abroad?

What do KUIS students think of study abroad upon their return to KUIS?

Methodology

Participants

26 students who have returned to KUIS from a semester/year-long study abroad were asked to complete a questionnaire and 18 responded. These 26 students are mutually exclusive to the 10 students who were interviewed for the purpose of making the questionnaire in order to avoid an interference to the distribution of data being collected, that is, to avoid having students choose the answer choices they made.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire needed to have closed-ended questions with answer choices that match KUIS context in order to fulfill the aim of the present study. Chirkov's (2007) Self-Regulation Questionnaire administered to investigate students' goals for study abroad was used as a benchmark for the level of specificity to be achieved. In order to generate answer choices that match KUIS context, 10 students were interviewed to talk about their expectations and experience as well as those can be of other KUIS students for study abroad. The interview contents were analyzed quantitatively and the answer choices were decided. Post-questionnaire interviews were conducted for a clarification for some answers. The questionnaire items are included in the following section.

Results

Table 1.

Q1. What were the reasons for your study abroad? (select all that apply)

Answer Options	%	Count
Wanted opportunities to use the target language more	83.3%	15
Wanted to live abroad	38.9%	7
Wanted to experience a different culture	83.3%	15
Forced by parents	0.0%	0
Had a vague feeling of yearning towards overseas	33.3%	6
Had a feeling of yearning for the place and/or culture of the study destination	44.4%	8
Wanted to teach Japanese culture	5.6%	1
Wanted to teach Japanese language	0.0%	0
Wanted to see Japan from outside	44.4%	8
Wanted to escape from the environment you were in	5.6%	1
For some reason or other	0.0%	0
Wanted to take courses you cannot take at KUIS	5.6%	1
Wanted foreign friends	50.0%	9
Wanted a foreign boy/girlfriend	5.6%	1
Wanted to go see friends	5.6%	1
Was looking for something new	50.0%	9
Wanted to change yourself	38.9%	7
Wanted to experience the thing called study abroad	44.4%	8
Other (please specify)	22.2%	4
- Wanted to see how much I can do this time around compared to the helpless three-week study abroad I did in high school*		
- Wanted to see how much I can do*		
- Wanted to level up my English proficiency		
- To be able to confidently say I'm proficient in English at work as a graduate of a foreign language university*		

* items account for the answer choice 'other' in Q2

Table 2.

Q2. What was the biggest reason among the answers you gave for Q1?

Answers	%	Count
Wanted opportunities to use the target language more	33.3%	6
Wanted to live abroad	16.7%	3
Wanted to experience a different culture	16.7%	3
Had a feeling of yearning for the destination as a place or for its culture	5.6%	1
Wanted to change yourself	5.6%	1
Wanted to experience the thing called study abroad	5.6%	1
Other	16.7%	3

The results in Table 1 and 2 show a similar attribute to the result of the study conducted by the Study Abroad Student Committee (2013). I expected the item ‘for some reason or other’ to get some marks because it was mentioned by several different students during the interviews but it did not get selected. Likewise, though the questionnaire answer choices were generated using the results of a quantitative analysis of the data collected from interviewing KUIS students, some items did not get selected. It may suggest a possibility that the two student groups participated in the present study, one for making the questionnaire and the other for completing it, consisted of different types of students, or a possibility that students give different answers depending on the mode they use when answering. Nonetheless, with or without the consideration for the possibility, it is clear that students want to use the target language more and experience a different culture. It is also safe to say that students wanted something new.

Table 3.

Q3. What did you get from the study abroad? (select all that apply)

Answer Options	%	Count
Used the target language more	88.9%	16
Experienced living abroad	55.6%	10
Experienced a different culture	77.8%	14
Made parents happy	11.1%	2
Fulfilled the feeling of yearning towards overseas	38.9%	7
Fulfilled the feeling of yearning for the destination as a place or for its culture	33.3%	6
Taught Japanese culture	16.7%	3
Taught Japanese language	11.1%	2
Saw Japan from outside	55.6%	10
Escaped from the environment you were in	0.0%	0
Took courses you could not take at KUIS	22.2%	4
Made foreign friends	83.3%	15
Made foreign a boy/girlfriend	22.2%	4
Went and saw friends	16.7%	3
Found something new	77.8%	14
Changed yourself	33.3%	6
Experienced the thing called study abroad	55.6%	10
Other (please specify)	22.2%	4
- Had a chance to see myself and found out what I lack in my language study and as a person*		
- Got a heart that never gives up*		
- Got exposed to different values, which broadened my areas of interest*		
- Learned how important it is to express my being		

* items account for the answer choice 'other' in Q4

Table 4.

Q4. What was the biggest thing among the answers you gave for Q3?

Answers	%	Count
Changed yourself	22.2%	4
Saw Japan from outside	16.7%	3
Used the target language more	11.1%	2
Made foreign friends	11.1%	2
Found something new	11.1%	2
Experienced a different culture	5.6%	1
Made foreign a boy/girlfriend	5.6%	1
Other	16.7%	3

The results in Table 3 show, by percentage and headcount, students' expectations for study abroad were met. Students perceive that study abroad gives them opportunities to use the target language more, make foreign friends, experience a different culture, and find something new. In Table 4, you can see an evidence for a shift in students' perception from study abroad primarily being an opportunity to use/acquire the target language and/or experience overseas to an opportunity to change themselves, change perceptions, and get in contact with things that are new to them including people they meet.

Table 5.

Q5. Which of the following did you get from the study abroad?

Answer Options	%	Count
Something you were expecting in study abroad	72.2%	13
Something you were not expecting	27.8%	5

Table 6.

Q6. What do you think of the study abroad?

Answer Options	%	Count
It was a good thing to do	100.0%	18
It was not exactly a good thing to do	0.0%	0
It is difficult to say what	0.0%	0

The results in Table 5 and 6 show whether students' expectations are met or not may not be a significant factor for the students when deciding whether the study abroad was a satisfactory experience or not as long as they recognize the fact that they did get something out of it. The fact that 100 percent of the students feeling happy about their study abroad may suggest that we have a strong reason to encourage students to go study abroad.

Table 7.

Q7. Are there things you wish you have had done before going to the study abroad?

Answers	%	Count
Yes: studying about Japan	16.7%	3
Yes: studying English in general	16.7%	3
Yes: studying vocabulary	11.1%	2
Yes: studying how to carry out a basic conversation in English	11.1%	2
Yes: studying about the place and culture of study abroad destination	11.1%	2
Yes: studying things related to the non-language courses I took there	5.6%	1
Yes: saving up money to buy a car there	5.6%	1
Yes: studying a way to study a language implicitly	5.6%	1
No	16.7%	3

Table 8.

Q8. Did the study abroad make your proficiency in the target language higher?

Answer Options	%	Count
Yes	100.0%	18
No	0.0%	0

In the interviews with the students to make the questionnaire, many mentioned about their struggle in communicating with locals and classmates during the study abroad because of their lack of communication competence in the target language. The reflection matches the results shown in Table 7 in general. However, the results in Table 8 show that they all notice an improvement in their proficiency in the target language. These results suggest there may have been an even larger improvement in proficiency in the target language if students prepared better for the study abroad in terms of the use of the language. The choice of answers in regard to knowing more about Japan and the study abroad destination suggest that it is inevitable to talk about those things while studying abroad and having a better knowledge on those things would have given the students more opportunities for communication.

Question 9 of the questionnaire asked students if they thought anything about KUIS when they returned. 10 respondents had something negative to say about KUIS in different degrees. The two common themes for the responses were: classes not being challenging and lack of student participation in class. On the other hand, three left a positive comment, which included their noticing on the fact there are different places and schemes to use English on campus and classes being taught in the same way they were being taught abroad.

Conclusion

The present study investigated students' expectation towards study abroad and whether study abroad meets those expectations or not. The results show the expectations are met though what students want to accomplish with the study abroad may change once they reach the study destination. The interviews with the students revealed a number of problems they had to face during the study abroad; however, the results of the questionnaire show all students expressing a positive attitude towards their study abroad. I may add a fact that, during the interview, several students expressed a positive attitude towards study abroad in general as well, that they strongly recommend other students to go study abroad for the purpose of language acquisition and personal development. If it is these qualities that enable students to be able to participate in the global arena, study abroad does fulfill MEXT's vision of improving Japan's global competitiveness. As for the areas of support we, KUIS teaching and advising staff, can give to our students for study abroad, to keep helping them in the areas of language proficiency development would never be unnecessary. In an effort to achieve that, we may want to keep in mind to make classes challenging and participation oriented. Expanding the SOGO class lineup may be in favor for the returning students also. Word of encouragement to go study abroad may be something students want from us as well, and from the results, we have no reasons not to encourage our students to go study abroad.

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