Studying "Abroad" Online:
Reflections from a Japanese University

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Abstract

In 2013, The Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management (DTHM) at Tamagawa University initiated a study abroad (SA) program in Melbourne, Australia. For qualifying students, they have an opportunity to study at one of four universities in Australia for 1 year. This study abroad program involves enrolling in foundational English language courses and in more advanced, content-based classes, conducted completely in English, with both Australian and other international students. In addition, it involves a multi-month homestay and dormitory residence. In early 2020, as the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tamagawa students who were in Australia at the time were forced to return to Japan to complete the latter half of the study abroad program. Since then, the Australian SA program has completely transitioned to an online platform and the Tamagawa students have not been able to travel to Australia. The aim of this paper is to explore online study "abroad" participation as seen through the eyes of the 2019 Tourism Department cohort. The researchers wanted to gain a better understanding of their attitude towards, opinion of, and experience with the online study abroad program.

Keywords: Study abroad，online learning，COVID-19

Introduction

SA Programs in Japanese Higher Education

Prior to COVID-19, study abroad programs for Japanese university students had been gaining popularity. In a recent survey by the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS), the number of Japanese students who studied abroad in 2016–2017 was approximately 80,000 (JAOS, 2017). However, this number plummeted to about 18,000 students in 2020 (JAOS, 2021). There has been an increased push in Japan for study abroad programs, especially for higher education. For instance, in 2013, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched the "Tobitate! (Leap for Tomorrow) Study Abroad" campaign that encourages Japanese university students to participate in SA programs (MEXT, n.d.). In addition, several university faculties in Japan have implemented mandatory SA programs as part of their curricula, including several departments at Tamagawa University. Traditionally, in addition to both linguistic and scholarly academic growth, the perceived benefits of SA programs include experiential learning, intercultural exposure, and personal development (Liu & Shirley, 2021). A large-scale Japanese study found that a study abroad experience led to several positive, long-term effects, including improved ability to interact with people from other backgrounds, characteristics that are valued in the workplace such as flexibility and

teamwork, and intrapersonal enhancement involving self-esteem and confidence (Research Consortium for the Sustainable Promotion of International Education, 2016).

COVID-19 Impact on SA Programs & Online Study Abroad Programs

The disruptive effects caused by the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic have been pervasive and drastic. No corner of the world has been shielded nor has any aspect of society or education been spared. Universities around the world have, at one point or another, sealed off their campuses completely or partially, seen a reduction in admission/enrollment numbers and have been forced to transition - again, either wholly or partially - to online and remote learning. In fact, according to UNESCO, as early as April 2020, over 220 million university students were experiencing disruptions to their education (as cited in Marinoni et al., 2020).

Although admittedly campus closures and partial shutdowns affect all students, those who were planning to be internationally mobile are uniquely impacted. A December report by Nakasato and Kayashima (2021) published by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), noted a recent survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU). The survey involved more than 400 stakeholders in higher education institutions (HEIs) from 109 different countries and it found that student mobility had been negatively affected at 89% of the institutions represented (Marinoni et al., 2020).

In the context of the post-COVID world, online learning can be seen as a type of education "saviour", providing both a platform and the tools necessary for universities to salvage what would have been completely infeasible prior to the digital era. However, the capabilities and promises offered by remote learning are severely stretched and often inadequate in providing a "true" study-abroad experience. This has left institutions, including Tamagawa University, facing the enormous challenge of reassessing the value and meaning of an "international experience".

Tamagawa University Department of Tourism SA program

In the spring of 2013, Tamagawa University and the newly formed Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management (DTHM) welcomed its first cohort of students. In August of the following year, those ninety-four students began a one-year study abroad (SA) program in Melbourne, Australia. To qualify for the study abroad program, students must clear a TOEIC score of 500 points. For those who meet the TOEIC requirement, beginning in the fall semester of their second year, they relocate to Australia to start their one-year SA program. Since 2013, each DTHM cohort has comprised approximately 100 students.

In 2014, three universities in the greater Melbourne area (Victoria State) agreed to host approximately thirty Tamagawa students each: Deakin University, Swinburne University of Technology and Victoria University. Beginning in 2020, one other university in the State of Queensland, Griffith University, was added to the list of partners. Efforts are made to avoid over-saturating any one particular university with Tamagawa students and thus, the DTHM students are assigned to one of the universities based on the following criteria: GPA, progression rate of TOEIC and the individual's highest TOEIC score.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study examines the following research questions in regard to our students' online SA experience:

    1) The students' reflections on how they felt about their online SA overall, including the best and worst aspects of it,

2) their feelings on how difficult it was to maintain motivation during online SA as well as how they managed their motivation,

3) their thoughts on the most challenging and the most valuable experiences during online SA, and finally,

4) the students' opinions on what could have been improved about the online SA experience.

This study used an anonymous online questionnaire to capture the participants' reflections and opinions about their online SA program. The participants took the online questionnaire in October 2021 during their required College Reading and Writing 1 course after having completed their online SA in August 2021. Seventy-six students completed the questionnaire, but three students indicated that they did not wish for their responses to be used for research, so their answers were deleted from the data. Consequently, a total of 73 students' responses were included in the results and the analysis. In this paper, the responses from eight of the twelve questions in the survey will be discussed: one of them being a quantitative question and the rest being qualitative questions. The open-ended questions asked the students to write responses either in English or Japanese. The authors have translated the few responses that were written in Japanese into English in the following section while the comments written in English have been left as written by the participants with no linguistic corrections. The open-ended comments were analyzed and coded using directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), discovering themes that emerge from the responses and relating them to the research questions.

Results

Overall experience

The first question was a quantitative question which asked the students to choose the best answer to the following question: "Overall, how do you feel about your online study abroad experience?" About one-third of the students, approximately 34%, had a positive reaction; they answered, "It was fantastic", "I really enjoyed it", "I enjoyed it", or "At first I didn't enjoy it, but eventually I did enjoy it." Another one-third had a somewhat neutral reaction by choosing, "It was okay, but nothing special". The final group of students, again about one-third or 32%, had a negative reaction towards their online SA experience. They chose one of the following responses: "I honestly did not enjoy it" or "It was a waste of time and money."

In the following sections, we will discuss the open-ended questions. All items in the questionnaire were required, so as a result, we received 73 responses. However, in some cases, students wrote down a neutral answer such as "nothing" or "I don't know". When analyzing the responses, we did not include such responses. Therefore, we will provide the number of quality content answers received for each question.

The best and worst aspects of online SA

Firstly, we asked what the students thought were the best and the worst aspects of the online SA program. The first question, "What was the best thing about online SA?" received 71 quality responses. The second question, "What was the worst thing about online SA?" also received 71 quality replies.

Overwhelmingly, the most popular response for the "best part" of their experience had to do with making friends and having classmates from all over the world. Sixty-eight of the students, about 95% of the participants, mentioned making foreign friends as the greatest part of their experience. One student com-

mented, "Talking with many classmates from other countries" while another student wrote, "Improving my communication skills with classmates who are from different countries" as being the best outcome of the program. Some students also commented on the fact that the experience of talking and studying with other international students was unique. One student reflected, "Making many friends who have various backgrounds was special," and another said, "With overseas friends, I could deepen my understanding of different cultures."

In regard to the worst thing about the online SA experience, there was no true unanimous agreement as the students' answers varied widely. However, the unavoidable misfortune of beginning a much-anticipated study "abroad" experience online was clearly the biggest disappointment noted by many students. Most comments revolved around some negative aspect of participating in a study abroad program online as the most unsatisfying factor. Roughly 30% of the students (N=22) simply stated that studying online, as opposed to face-to-face, and not being able to travel to Australia was the worst thing. Many students (N=15) also complained about network problems or poor internet connection which negatively affected their studies. One student wrote, "Sometimes, network-connection prevented me from listening properly and discussing with classmates; especially, in the mixed class (face to face & online)." Another common answer involved the quality of online classes. Several students (N=11) pointed out that the online study environment was not best for learning. One student stated, "A lot of time was wasted in break out rooms that were silent because nobody was talking," while another participant admitted, "Group work online was the worst experience because it was not done well and it did not work at all."

The most challenging and valuable features of online SA

The next two items were similar to the previously discussed questions asking students "What was the most difficult challenge during online SA?" (N=73), and "What was the most valuable thing you gained from online SA?" (N=73).

Two main themes emerged from the most challenging aspect students faced: the first had to do with the academic tasks they were expected to complete and the second was related to the fact that their studies were online. Almost half of the students (N=34) agreed that the academic requirements of writing a research paper, delivering an academic presentation, and expressing their opinions on academic English topics during discussions were the most demanding assignments of the program. In addition, numerous students (N=21) expressed the struggles encountered with the online learning environment as being the most challenging. One student wrote, "The online classroom atmosphere," another one commented, "Communication with classmates in an online classroom was difficult. Sometimes there was a situation when nobody talked," and finally, one student said, "Making friends with other students in an online environment was the most difficult challenge for me because it was difficult to realize classmates' feelings when their videos were off." Another troubling aspect mentioned by several students (N=6) was that, due to the remote learning environment, it was often difficult to get the necessary help from teachers or other students when confronted with a question or problem as it was impossible to ask or seek assistance in real-time.

Similarly, two main themes emerged from the data about the most valuable element gained from online SA, and they were academic achievements and interpersonal social benefits. Again, nearly 50% of the students (N=35) mentioned that improving reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in an academic environment was the most treasured part of the program. Approximately 35% of the students (N=26)

mentioned that friendships and exposure to different people from different cultures around the world were the prized outcomes of the program. One student commented, "I think the most valuable thing was understanding other cultures," while another replied, "Interaction with other countries' students helped me to understand other cultures."

Maintaining motivation during online SA

The next two questions concerned student motivation during online SA. Question five was, "Do you think it was difficult to stay motivated during online SA? Why or why not?" (N=72). The follow-up question asked, "What did you do to maintain your motivation?" (N=70).

Almost all students agreed that maintaining motivation during online SA was a challenge (N=68). Some of the reasons listed were confusion about class expectations and tasks, the many distractions at home while participating in classes from home, the difficulty of forming connections between fellow classmates and teachers in an online environment, a lack of opportunities to use English outside of classes, and feeling lonely, isolated and depressed. Perhaps not surprisingly, a few students (N=4) mentioned that it was easier to maintain motivation during synchronous classes than during classes that utilized on-demand resources (i.e., asynchronous).

The students cited a wide variety of methods for maintaining their motivation. The most prominent means (N=35) involved getting in touch with friends and talking and spending time with them. Others included enjoying hobbies, watching tv and movies, eating favorite foods, relying on the comfort of pets, and using social media. In addition, several students (N=9) specified grades and teacher feedback as motivation, and it encouraged them to strive harder and to study harder to achieve higher grades.

Suggestions for improvement of online SA

Finally, we sought the students' opinions on how the experience could have been improved by asking them, "What do you think could have been improved about the online SA experience?" (N=69). Before articulating the results, it is important to note that some students appeared to have misunderstood the question as some responses focused on personal, English communication skill improvements they achieved rather than the program overall. These answers were not included in analysis of the data. As for the responses which did address the question, we received a wide array of different suggestions. Students commented on both what they could have done themselves to better their experience and how the overall program could have been improved.

On an individual level, many reflected on what they themselves should have done to make their learning experience more fruitful. Students admitted that they should have been more proactive in class, more rigorous and disciplined with homework assignments, and given greater attention to time-management skills. There were several suggestions addressing how the program could have been enriched. One respondent noted, "There should have been more individual student support, especially in this online study environment," another offered, "Online SA should include more opportunities to communicate with other students and take part in club activities," one student said, "Having more interactive lessons would have been better rather than passive lessons," and another student mentioned, "There was a need to strengthen support after language classes." In addition, there were several remarks concerning a reduction of homework and improving the method(s) of sharing information with students.

Discussion

As expected, an online SA program did present some challenges for the students unique to remote learning, many of which are present in any online learning situation, not only in an SA context. Based on the responses, the greatest challenge for the students centered on not being able to meet teachers and classmates physically. This resulted in decreased motivation, disappointment, and difficulty in reaching their learning goals. Another obstacle concerned the drawbacks of remote learning using technology. Many students felt that the learning experience was hindered by the impersonal computer environment in which they encountered connectivity issues as well as a lack of peers' presence and accountability.

Conversely, several of the reflections that were reported may overlap with various pros and cons usually seen in a traditional, on-site SA experience. On a positive note, most of the students developed enriching and meaningful relationships with their classmates from around the world. They found the experience of communicating and getting to know people from different backgrounds and cultures extremely rewarding. In addition, the students who were proactive and involved in their studies did feel like the academic experience was fulfilling and beneficial despite the challenging circumstances. On the other hand, the academic expectations and workload were the biggest criticisms voiced by the students, but the same complaint could probably be expected about a traditional SA program.

Considering COVID-19 and the possibility of continued remote learning, including SA programs, universities need to recognize the shortcomings of such learning environments and take steps to address them to provide an SA experience that is seen as both valuable and worthwhile.

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