

[研究論文]

A Hybrid Study Abroad Program: Reflections from a Japanese University

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Abstract

Following the disruption and complete cancellation of in-person study abroad in Australia, Tamagawa University's Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management (DTHM) resumed its Australian Study Abroad Program, including a return to the original model, albeit with crucial and profound changes. In light of the numerous risks still posed by the coronavirus, but still eager to provide a study abroad program, the status quo was abandoned and a hybrid learning model was adopted. The 88 students who comprised the 2020 cohort in the DTHM can therefore be considered pioneers in this "new normal" of studying abroad. In fact, they began their study "abroad" program in Japan - what some might call distance learning - by joining their Australian classes remotely using digital technologies, online tools, and software. The 2021 fall semester was spent in this fashion and then, in a cautious step forward, a majority of the students traveled to Melbourne, Australia at the end of the fall term in March 2022 to resume their studies in-person. Using data gathered from an online questionnaire, the aim of this paper is to explore both the initial, distance learning aspect of the program and also the latter, in-person experience as seen through the eyes of the 2020 Tourism Department cohort. The researchers wanted to gain a better understanding of their attitude towards, opinion of, and experience with this new, hybrid learning study abroad model and program.

Keywords: Study abroad, online learning, hybrid learning, COVID-19, distance learning

Introduction

Study Abroad Programs in a post-COVID 19 World

The study abroad (SA) program established in 2013 between Tamagawa University and three (currently) universities in Australia has been very successful, well-received and a huge educational and cultural benefit for the students in the Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management. Obviously, the chance to study abroad is extremely attractive - to both students and the respective institutions - and it is widely recognized as a "value-added" experience for undergraduate students.

As most countries around the world, Japan included, began a strategy of trying to "live with" the novel coronavirus, rather than completely focusing on eradication, many questions were raised regarding SA and overseas travel in general: Where is it safe to travel? How long is it safe to stay? Has "on-the-ground" infrastructure adapted to these new circumstances and are the staff and human resources ready to support new arrivals?

In a chapter discussing the future of study abroad in a post-COVID-19 world, Bodinger de Uriarte and Di Giovine (2020) claim that the most extreme and lasting changes wrought by the global pandemic has been to the college experience and specifically, study abroad. In 2020, the Institute for International Education conducted a survey on COVID-19's effect on SA programs. 285 institutions collectively reported a total of more than 22,000 students studying abroad in the spring of 2020. With the disruptions caused by the pandemic, 253 of those same institutions evacuated almost 18,000 of those students, or 81% of the total. At the time of this sudden exodus and return home, a teacher in Italy commented that her students told her "they felt robbed of a life-changing event" (p.328).

Since the focus of a post-COVID-19 world is now learning to live with the virus and manage the risks, in early 2022 the Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management decided it was the appropriate time to allow students to have at least a partial in-person experience in Australia.

Tamagawa University Department of Tourism SA program

For the first eight months of the SA program from August 2021 until March 2022, the students were unfortunately required to remain in Japan. Using digital technologies and software applications that have now become routine, the students participated in their Australian classes remotely. Essentially, they were participating in distance learning. However, in March 2022, the DTHM cohort finally departed for Australia to complete their year-long SA program. Once in Australia and at their respective universities, the students participated in a hybrid educational program. Most of these classes were face-to-face, in fact the majority were in-person, but many students had at least one class per week online or via Zoom/Teams. The students at Victoria University for example, joined in-person classes two days per week and one day via video conferencing.

Online SA experiences

In an earlier study, Matikainen & Cote (2021) explored the previous DTHM cohort's study abroad experience which took place entirely online by asking about their opinions and experiences with this style of SA. They found that an online SA program did obviously present some challenges for the students unique to remote learning. The greatest challenge for the students was not being able to meet teachers and classmates physically which resulted in decreased motivation, disappointment, and difficulty in reaching their learning goals. In addition, many students said that the impersonal nature of a computer environment frustrated them and their studies. However, a majority of the students experienced enriching and meaningful relationships with their international classmates. Furthermore, those students who consistently made an effort had a fulfilling academic experience. Building upon that previous study, the authors wanted to understand how the latest cohort of our students experienced a hybrid SA program.

Research Questions and Methodology

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the differences between the students' experience of studying abroad online while in Japan versus studying abroad in-person in Australia. Specifically, the study examines the following aspects of our students' hybrid SA experience:

- 1) The students' reflections on how they felt about their SA overall in each location, with particular emphasis on the best and worst aspects in addition to the most challenging characteristics of each situation;
- 2) their feelings on how each SA experience helped them improve their English, experience intercultural communication, make new friends, and facilitate new experiences; and finally,
- 3) their thoughts on how difficult it was to maintain motivation during these two different SA experiences.

This study used an anonymous online questionnaire to capture the participants' reflections and opinions about their hybrid SA program. The participants completed the online questionnaire in December 2022 during their required College Reading and Writing 1 course after having concluded the SA program in July 2022. Seventy-three students participated in the questionnaire, and all indicated that they agreed to the use of their responses for research purposes. The questionnaire consisted of ten quantitative questions: one closed question of predetermined choices and nine Likert-scale questions, and six open-ended, qualitative questions. The Likert-scale questions consisted of five choices ranging from 5=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree. The open-ended questions asked the students to record 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. The results for all the questions will be presented in the following section.

Results

Overall experience

The two closed items in the questionnaire asked the students to choose the best answer corresponding to their overall SA experience, both in Japan and in Australia. The six answer choices and the student responses are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Student perceptions of overall experience in Japan vs. in Australia

Answer choice	SA in Japan	SA in Australia
<i>It was fantastic.</i>	n=3 (4.1%)	n=18 (24.7%)
<i>I really enjoyed it.</i>	n=2 (2.7%)	n=13 (17.8%)
<i>I enjoyed it.</i>	n=10 (13.7%)	n=17 (23.3%)
<i>At first I didn't enjoy it, but eventually I enjoyed it.</i>	n=11 (15.1%)	n=10 (13.7%)
<i>It was ok, but nothing special.</i>	n=39 (53.4%)	n=11 (15.1%)
<i>I did not enjoy it.</i>	n=8 (11%)	n=3 (4.1%)

Over half of the students did not particularly enjoy the online SA experience from Japan. Forty-seven students, or about 65%, chose "I did not enjoy it," or "It was ok, but nothing special," as their answers for

their feelings about the program while physically present in Japan. The rest of the students were more satisfied with the program, with five students, or about 7%, expressing great satisfaction by choosing “It was fantastic,” or “I really enjoyed it” to summarize their feelings. Ten students, or about 14% of the students chose simply, “I enjoyed it” as their answer. The rest of the students, about 14% of the students (n=11) chose, “At first I didn’t enjoy it, but eventually I enjoyed it,” as their answer.

On the other hand, the results were somewhat more positive for the SA experience while physically in Australia. About 66% of the students (n=48) expressed satisfaction with this part of the hybrid program, with 18 students, or about 25% of the students, choosing “It was fantastic,” as their response. Furthermore, 13 students, or about 18% of the students, answered, “I really enjoyed it,” while 17 students, about 23% of the students, chose, “I enjoyed it,” as their response. Conversely, only 3 students, about 4%, answered, “I did not enjoy it,” and 11 students, about 15%, chose, “It was ok, but nothing special,” as their response. The rest of the students, (n=10), about 14% of them chose, “At first I didn’t enjoy it, but eventually I enjoyed it.”

English improvement

The first Likert-scale question examined the students’ perceptions on the improvement of their English skills, initially while in Japan and then again while living in Australia. The participants’ answers are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Students’ feedback on improvement of English in Japan vs. in Australia

SA Program helped to improve my English	SA in Japan	SA in Australia
<i>Strongly agree</i>	n=6 (8.2%)	n=23 (31.5%)
<i>Agree</i>	n=16 (21.9%)	n=28 (38.4%)
<i>Neutral</i>	n=24 (32.9%)	n=14 (19.2%)
<i>Disagree</i>	n=20 (27.4%)	n=5 (6.8%)
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	n=7 (9.6%)	n=3 (4.1%)

As Table 2 shows, students clearly felt that being in Australia was more helpful at improving their English. A majority of the students, about 70%, chose “strongly agree” or “agree” for how helpful the SA program was in Australia, while conversely only about 30% felt this way about their English with the SA program while in Japan. In fact, nearly 40% of the students chose “strongly disagree” or “disagree” when asked about how helpful the SA program in Japan was at improving their English.

Intercultural experiences

The second Likert-scale question asked about the students’ feelings on how easy it was to have intercultural communication experiences during the SA program, both in Japan and in Australia. The students’ responses are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Students' responses about experiencing intercultural communication

SA program helped me experience intercultural communication	SA in Japan	SA in Australia
<i>Strongly agree</i>	n=8 (11%)	n=35 (47.9%)
<i>Agree</i>	n=18 (24.7%)	n=23 (31.5%)
<i>Neutral</i>	n=19 (26%)	n=8 (11%)
<i>Disagree</i>	n=22 (30.1%)	n=5 (6.8%)
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	n=6 (8.2%)	n=2 (2.7%)

As can be seen in Table 3, naturally, the students felt that experiencing intercultural communication was much more prominent in the Australian context. A majority of the students, about 80%, chose “strongly agree” or “agree” that it helped them experience intercultural communication, while conversely only about 35% said the same thing for their experience while taking classes in Japan.

Making new friends and having new experiences

The third Likert-scale question inquired about the students' feelings on whether (or not) they were able to make new friends and have new experiences during the SA program. The participants' answers are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Students' responses regarding making new friends and having new experiences

SA program helped me make new friends & have new experiences	SA in Japan	SA in Australia
<i>Strongly agree</i>	n=8 (11%)	n=31 (42.5%)
<i>Agree</i>	n=16 (21.9%)	n=23 (31.5%)
<i>Neutral</i>	n=21 (28.8%)	n=12 (16.4%)
<i>Disagree</i>	n=15 (20.5%)	n=5 (6.8%)
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	n=13 (17.8%)	n=2 (2.7%)

According to Table 4, when asked if the SA program in Japan helped them make new friends and have new experiences, only about a third of the students agreed or strongly agreed while close to 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed. On the other hand, when asked the same question in the Australian context, about three quarters of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement while less than 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Maintaining motivation

The final Likert-scale question examined the students' feelings on motivation and specifically, whether it was easy to maintain motivation while studying in Japan versus studying in Australia. The students' responses are summarized in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Students' responses regarding motivation in Japan vs. in Australia

It was easy to stay motivated	SA in Japan	SA in Australia
<i>Strongly agree</i>	n=2 (2.7%)	n=19 (26%)
<i>Agree</i>	n=6 (8.2%)	n=24 (32.9%)
<i>Neutral</i>	n=13 (17.8%)	n=17 (23.3%)
<i>Disagree</i>	n=18 (24.7%)	n=8 (11%)
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	n=34 (46.6%)	n=5 (6.8%)

As shown in Table 5, the question regarding motivation also gave predictable answers. Most students, about 75%, said that it was not easy to maintain motivation while distance learning from Japan. Conversely, less than 20% of the students felt this way while taking classes in Australia, and in fact, nearly 60% of students said that it was easy to stay motivated while in Australia.

The best, the worst, and the most challenging aspects of the SA program

For the open-ended items, we asked the students what they thought were the best, the worst, and the most challenging aspects of their SA experiences. In some instances, students wrote answers that did not provide us with any useful information, such as “nothing”. These responses were not included in the analysis; therefore, we will provide the number of quality responses received for each question.

SA in Japan

The question about the best aspect of the SA program while in Japan produced 65 unique answers. The most common themes that emerged are discussed below. Firstly, many students commented on making new friends and intercultural communication as being the best part of the program (n=16). One student wrote, “I make new friends and learn a lot of thing from them,” while another commented, “To have shared each culture with different countries friends at the group discussion.” Secondly, time management (n=13) was mentioned by several students. Some of the details included being able to sleep longer, not needing to commute, and being able to use time effectively. Next, several students did mention academic skills, including improvement of English, writing, and listening skills, as being the best part of the program while in Japan. In addition, for some students, not having to meet people face-to-face was beneficial (n=8). One student said, “I don’t like to communicate with people, so it was easy to have conversation because I didn’t have to meet people.” Finally, many students enjoyed the comfortable class atmosphere from home (n=9). Some other benefits of participating in the SA program from Japan mentioned by students were being able to work part-time and saving money.

The question about the worst aspect of the SA program while in Japan produced 70 unique answers. The most common themes that emerged are discussed below. The most frequent answer involved the difficulty of communicating with classmates and teachers including asking questions from teachers (n=25). One student said, “It is very difficult to communicate with foreigners only online, so it was very stressful,” while another wrote, “It was difficult for me to communicate with other members because it’s hard to read each feeling and emotion.” Also, lack of motivation was mentioned as the most difficult aspect. Many students commented that it was difficult to stay motivated, often because of boredom (n=11). In addition, English was a cause of concern. Some students complained that they could not improve their English (n=11), and

some students did not enjoy the fact that they could not get used to English because it wasn't used in daily basis (n=10). One student wrote, "When I finished my class, it is completely in Japan, so there are no chance to speak English except for English class," another one pointed out that "I couldn't speak English in natural life," and one other student wrote, "Most students were Japanese and we used a lot of Japanese." Finally, technical difficulties and the physical demands of online studying (n=10) were an issue. One student put it this way: "Online classes were physically demanding as they involved sitting and using a computer for long hours every day."

In regard to the final open-ended question about the SA program in Japan, which pointed to the most challenging part of the program, 73 unique answers were provided by the students. The answers were quite similar to the previous question about the worst thing about taking classes online from Japan. Many students said making friends (n=33) was the most challenging thing. Similarly, many students felt that group work and class communication online were the biggest challenges (n=30). One student specifically said, "To tell my opinion in the group" was the most difficult thing. Another student wrote, "Talking with other guys who is Asian in English was very hard to talk because their English accent is different," while a similar sentiment was expressed by a different student by writing, "Hard to listen non-native English speakers' English accent." Some other notable mentions included academic skills such as writing essays with sources and references, giving presentations, sitting in front of the computer all day, and staying motivated.

SA in Australia

The question about the best aspect of the SA program in Australia produced 71 unique answers. Students were very much in agreement with this question. Most students felt that making friends (n=39), meeting their host families (n=30), and experiencing Australia (n=24) were the best parts of being able to take classes in Australia. One student wrote, "I could make foreign friends and experienced Australian life-style," another one said, "All of the students which I took the class was Australian, so I could make Aussie friends," and finally, one student wrote, "I could feel atmosphere of Australia."

When asked about the worst part of the program in Australia, there was a wide range of answers and a total of 65 unique answers. Many students commented on the academic aspect of the program; specifically, some students had to take online classes even in Australia which made them unhappy, and many challenging class assessments and assignments were viewed negatively. Communication problems were another common theme emerging from this question. Communication problems with teachers, classmates, and host families were all mentioned by the students. Other issues that students noted regarding their host families were lack of an appropriate study environment at home, and cultural differences such as differences in hygiene with host families. Certain aspects of Australian life also presented difficulties for the students: for example, some students did not enjoy the food, many students suffered because of high prices and restrictions on length of shower time. Finally, several students commented on feeling homesick for family, friends, and Japanese food.

In regard to the most challenging aspect of SA in Australia, 67 unique answers were provided. Many students (n=33) felt that communicating in English and the problems that arose because of this was the most challenging thing for them. One student wrote, "Most challenging thing was absolutely English skills. For example, during discussion class, it was difficult to convey my opinion and understand other student's opinion in English." In addition, many students (n=19) felt that the academic requirements of writing essays,

giving presentations, and taking tests were the biggest challenges.

Discussion

The recent turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced a complete redesign of the Australian SA program model two years ago. As it was risky and unsafe to travel internationally, the SA experience had to pivot completely online and at a distance. However, in early 2022, as the pandemic became manageable and international borders re-opened, another iteration of the Australian SA program was created. As a hybrid study abroad program, the 2020 DTHM cohort began their experience online from within Japan and then, approximately eight months later, traveled to Australia to complete the program.

Overall, more than half of the students reported that the initial experience spent online was not enjoyable or, “nothing special”. As can be expected from an online study abroad program, this arrangement did present challenges to the students’ indicative of distance learning and a true study “abroad” experience. On the other hand, the feedback was more positive for the SA experience while physically living and studying in Australia. Almost 66% of the students noted their satisfaction and enjoyment with this stage of the hybrid program, with about 25% of them saying “It was fantastic”. Furthermore, about 18% of the students said, “I really enjoyed it,” while 17 students, about 23% of the students, chose, “I enjoyed it,” to summarize the SA program from within Australia.

Student responses indicated that students overwhelmingly felt that being in Australia was more helpful at improving their English. Similarly, they commented that it was much easier for them to make friends, have new experiences, and enjoy intercultural communication while in Australia. They found that these things were not so easily achieved while taking online classes from Japan. In addition, and perhaps not unsurprising, students expressed that maintaining motivation while studying in Australia was much easier than while in Japan.

Based on the responses gathered, the greatest enjoyment of the initial phase (SA from within Japan) of the 2021 program was making new friends and partaking in intercultural communication. As for the worst aspect of the same initial phase, the students noted the greatest difficulty was communicating with classmates and teachers. However, the latter stage of the program was physically spent in Australia and a majority of students said that the best aspects of that particular stage was making new friends, meeting their host families, and experiencing Australian life and culture. Nonetheless, there were a variety of negative aspects reported about the SA experience from within Australia. Many noted that, despite being in Australia, some of their university classes unfortunately remained online. The academic aspect of the experience was also the subject of complaints and many lamented over the challenging assignments and difficult course assessments. Communication problems were also an issue, especially between the Tamagawa students and their host families, teachers, and peers.

In light of the post-COVID-19 world and the possibility of continued or partial remote learning, including SA programs, universities need to recognize the strengths and shortcomings of this new normal learning environment and take steps to address them. This can help in providing a valuable and worthwhile SA experience, whether it is online, in-person or a combination of both.

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