

Exploring Student Needs for Overseas Programs Through Collaboration With International Exchange Partnerships

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The Asian Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly reshaped attitudes toward study abroad among university students enrolled in study-abroad-required curricula, while simultaneously disrupting established international mobility programs such as student exchange and overseas study. At the same time, higher education institutions worldwide accelerated the development of domestic and online alternatives for international learning, including virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning. This proceedings paper examines changes in student perceptions of study abroad during the pandemic and explores how international programs were sustained through a combination of institutional support and long-standing human networks among faculty and partner institutions. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the study analyzes cultural dynamics of communication in cross-cultural learning, with particular attention to uncertainty avoidance and individualism–collectivism. The findings indicate that pandemic conditions heightened uncertainty avoidance in intercultural communication, influencing student engagement and expectations in both physical and online international programs. In addition, a case study of the Galway–Kitakyushu exchange program demonstrates how research-based relationships and sustained faculty collaboration contributed to the resilience and continuity of international exchange during periods of disruption. By highlighting the complementary roles of structural frameworks and interpersonal academic networks, this study contributes to ongoing discussions of international higher education, student mobility, and the long-term sustainability of exchange programs in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: study abroad, Covid-19, international exchange, intercultural communication, virtual exchange, student mobility

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Introduction

International exchange programs in higher education are shaped not only by institutional policies and funding frameworks but also by long-standing human connections among researchers, faculty, and partner institutions. This proceedings paper, based on a presentation delivered at The Asian Conference on Education 2025, examines student attitudes toward study abroad during the Covid-19 pandemic and explores how international programs were sustained through both structural support and personal academic networks. In addition to quantitative and qualitative data on student perceptions, this paper highlights the Galway–Kitakyushu exchange program as a case study demonstrating how research-based relationships can develop into durable international education initiatives.

Institutional Context and History of International Exchange at The University of Kitakyushu

The city of Kitakyushu is located on the northern tip of the southern island of Kyushu. The city of Kitakyushu is in South Japan close to Fukuoka with easy connections to larger cities of Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo with close proximity to Korea across the Japan Sea. The cities of Moji and Kokura joined with three other cities of Tobata, Yahata, and Wakamatsu to form the city of Kitakyushu in 1963. It now has a population of around 1 million people being the 13th largest city in Japan. Historically known for steel, metal, and shipping industries, it is becoming a force in producing new computer software, automobile technology and environmental technology. Once one of the most polluted cities in Japan, Kitakyushu has worked hard to clean its air and water, and in recent years has won international recognition for its contribution to the environment. It was named an Environmental Model City in 2008.

The university was founded as Kokura Foreign Affairs College in 1946 to promote peace and international exchange at the end of World War II. The foundation of the university is a testament to the pursuit of international understanding and exchanges out of the ashes of war. If it had not been for billowing black smoke from the third air raid on the city of Yahata on August 8, 1945, Kokura would have most likely been the primary target of the second atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki the next day on August 9, 1945. The mayor at that time proclaimed that the new college would be an institution of peace and that students would learn the languages of former adversaries for peace and reconciliation, so the college started with English and Chinese studies as primary subjects. Kokura was in complete ruin and students even cleared the grounds of debris as they studied. Thanks to the persistent efforts of former president Oshima, the Ministry of Education finally gave its approval, and it accepted its first incoming class in 1946. It was miraculous as the college was still faced with almost insurmountable odds in its actualization. It faced financial hurdles, and the city opened a profession bicycle racing track, now a horse racing track, to bring in more revenue. Thus, the university's primary monorail entrance is now the Keibajo racing station. Today, The University of Kitakyushu now consists of six facilities and four graduate schools. There are around 6700 students of which around 300 are international students.

In 1958, an exchange of gifts prompted the cities of Moji, Japan and Norfolk, Virginia to begin a sister-city relationship. This motivated Moji's neighboring city, Kokura, to apply for their own sister-city in 1959, and Kokura was matched with the city of Tacoma, Washington. In 1964, the newly formed city of Kitakyushu proudly continued its relationships with Norfolk and Tacoma. That same year, eight years before the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China in 1972, then Prime Minister Zhou Enlai ordered the establishment

of an institute based on the prospect that Japanese-language personnel would be needed when Japan and China would establish diplomatic relations in the future. The University of Kitakyushu and Dalian University of Foreign Languages just celebrated the 30th anniversary of their exchange programs in November 2019. The 25th anniversary of the exchange program between Cardiff University was celebrated with the arrival in Kitakyushu of the Wales national rugby union team in Kitakyushu during the 2018 World Cup. Yuji Yamazaki, professor emeritus and former director of the Centre for International Education and Exchanges at The University of Kitakyushu, was instrumental in the establishment of the earliest exchange programs with China and the U.S. and U.K. While watching 15,000 citizens cheer on the Welsh rugby team in 2018 he remarked, "The seed that I planted has now grown into something that I am very proud of."

The University of Kitakyushu has been a dynamic center of higher education and international exchange for more than 70 years in the Kyushu region of Japan. In its pursuit of internationalization and global connections, the university has established ties through agreements with Australia, China, Canada, Korea, the U.K., the U.S., Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and, most recently, Cambodia, Germany, Malaysia, and the Republic of Ireland. The University of Kitakyushu has regularly received high national and prefectural rankings for its study abroad programs. It currently has approximately 30 partnerships in more than 13 countries. Approximately 230 students can join yearly outbound programs. The university currently has student exchange agreements with partners including Australia, the UK, America, Canada, and Europe including France, Germany and the Republic of Ireland. When exchange agreements are established, the university offers specialized courses along with Japanese language programs through the Center for International Education and Exchange to incoming students from partner universities.

The Center for International Education and Exchange and Department of English work together to provide exchange students with various experiences and opportunities for international on campus and extracurricular activities. One major goal of the university is to provide incoming students from overseas partners with Japanese language courses. Three areas of Japanese instruction are offered at five to six different levels including Life Japanese for basic communication, Campus Japanese which allows students to function at the university and Academic Japanese for taking classes and courses in Japanese. In this respect, students are given the opportunity to enroll in classes with undergraduate Japanese students. Students are encouraged to get involved and experience Japanese cultural activities so Japanese language courses are accompanied with Japanese Culture classes. Students can experience various facets of traditional culture such as Ikebana, Japanese music, the tea ceremony, calligraphy, and traditional dance.

The Department of English works with the Center for International Education and Exchange to offer subjects taught in English. As the level of English within the Department of English is rather high, a diverse selection of advanced courses taught in the English language are also offered to international students for the purpose of credit exchanges at their home institutions. To explain in further detail, there are three different areas of courses. Language and Linguistics focuses on gaining abilities to understand language, language theory, with a focus on those students who wish to become English teachers. Society and Culture offers courses in American Studies, Literature, Introduction to Film, Literature and Theatre. Global Business obviously focuses on business with all courses offered in English. Thus students can mix their education at The University of Kitakyushu between Japanese and in-depth English courses as well. This is made possible by diverse staff of educators from Britain, America, Australia, Canada, and of

course Japanese nationals who are all bilingual and well equipped to offer academic and professional courses in English.

The university was designated as part of the Ministry of Education's Global Human Resources Project in 2013 and received a special to expand global programs and partnerships before being faced with the challenges of the global pandemic. A major result of this was the reformation of the Department of English to provide the staffing allows the university to provide Japanese and international students with a diversity of course offerings that are not common at most public intuitions in Japan. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the growth of international partnerships and the numbers of outgoing students attending exchange and study abroad programs was steadily increasing because of the enhanced educational environment created by collaboration and cooperation between the Center for International Education and Exchange and The Department of English.

Impact of Covid-19 on Study Abroad Participation

In the decade preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of Japanese students studying abroad increased steadily. According to data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the number of outbound Japanese students more than tripled between 2009 and 2019, supported by national initiatives aimed at fostering global human resources. The Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented disruption to international mobility. Border closures, visa restrictions, and program cancellations resulted in a dramatic decline in outbound study abroad participation in 2020 and 2021. Similar trends were observed in other countries, including China, where student interest in overseas study declined sharply during the same period. To examine how these disruptions affected student attitudes, online surveys were conducted at The University of Kitakyushu in October 2021 and June 2022 using Microsoft Forms. The surveys targeted students enrolled in programs for which study abroad is a curricular requirement and addressed students' intentions, priorities, and concerns regarding international programs.

Cultural Interpretation of Student Attitudes

Survey results indicated a gradual recovery of interest in overseas programs by 2022 as travel restrictions eased. At the same time, students placed increased emphasis on cost, program content, and support systems when selecting international programs. Students who opted for domestic alternatives frequently cited financial constraints, health concerns, uncertainty related to the pandemic, and family consent as determining factors.

These findings can be interpreted through Hofstede's cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance, which characterizes Japan as a society with a strong preference for structure and predictability. The pandemic intensified uncertainty avoidance tendencies, underscoring the importance of clear communication, predictable procedures, and visible support structures in the design of international exchange programs (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Collaborative Online International Learning During the Pandemic

In response to restrictions on physical mobility, The University of Kitakyushu implemented collaborative online international learning (COIL) as an alternative to on-site study abroad. Using synchronous online tools, students engaged in academic collaboration with overseas partner universities during a period when physical exchange was largely impossible.

Qualitative analysis of student reflections identified three main themes: active involvement in discussions, cultural perceptions, and challenges in language communication. These findings suggest that while COIL cannot fully replace physical mobility, it can provide meaningful intercultural learning experiences during periods of global disruption (Ikeda, 2020; Lenkaitis et al., 2019).

The Galway–Kitakyushu Exchange Program: Research Origins and Human Connections

A central case study presented in this paper is the academic exchange program between The University of Kitakyushu and the University of Galway in Ireland. The origins of this partnership are closely linked to long-term research connections centered on the Irish writer Lafcadio Hearn, whose life and work bridged Ireland, the United States, and Japan. Scholarly collaboration and academic networks developed through Hearn research served as the initial catalyst for institutional exchange.

The Galway–Kitakyushu agreement facilitates reciprocal student mobility, enabling Japanese students to study in an English-speaking academic environment while offering Irish students opportunities for Japanese language study and cultural immersion in Kitakyushu. The program exemplifies how international exchange initiatives are sustained not only through formal agreements but also through enduring human relationships among researchers, faculty members, and administrators.

Japanese students studying in Galway benefit from comprehensive advisory support, including guidance on applications, visas, housing, and academic integration. Orientation programs and ongoing support from international offices, counseling services, and language assistance help students navigate academic and social adjustment. At the same time, students face challenges related to independent housing, cultural differences in classroom participation, and financial pressures such as currency fluctuations.

Discussion: Sustainability of Exchange Programs Through Human Networks

The Galway case underscores a central argument of this paper: international exchange programs are maintained through human connections as much as through institutional structures. Research ties, faculty engagement, and sustained communication play a critical role in addressing challenges such as pandemic-related disruptions, housing shortages, and administrative complexity. These human networks complement institutional frameworks and contribute to the long-term sustainability of exchange programs.

Conclusion

This proceedings paper has examined changes in student attitudes toward study abroad during the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of collaborative online international learning, and the significance of human connections in sustaining international exchange programs. The Galway–Kitakyushu partnership demonstrates how research-based relationships can evolve into durable educational collaborations. Together, these findings suggest that resilient international education requires both structured institutional support and strong interpersonal networks.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge that the research presented in this paper was conducted collaboratively. While the conference presentation was delivered by the first author, the study draws directly on joint research undertaken with Yumiko Shibata. In addition, part of the case study research discussed in this paper was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (科研費, KAKENHI) provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate the content of this manuscript. AI tools were used solely to assist in organizing and formatting the manuscript for conference proceedings submission. All ideas, analyses, and interpretations are the original work of the authors.

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