

Does Financial Support Matter?
Scholarships and Study Abroad Preferences for First Year University Students in Japan

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The European Conference on Education 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper looks at differences in study abroad programme preferences collected from online questionnaires taken by two cohorts of first year Japanese university students (2023: n107 and 2024: n99). The rationale for the research was to determine whether students' preferences i.e. languages, destinations, programme length and type would be affected by changes to funding amounts and methods. The 3 main findings of the research showed that first, popularity in 'inner circle' English speaking countries as well as in China and South Korea continued together with more interest in France, Spain, Mexico and the Philippines. Second, short- and medium-term programmes i.e. less than six months in duration were more popular than long-term programmes i.e. those six months or longer. Third, there was a slight increase in interest in exchange programmes. While recognising the limitations of the data, only first year students from one university and carried out over a two-year period, the insight into the preferences of the students revealed that the changes in financial support could be seen to affect the destination chosen as well as the length and type of programme. Expanded research including older students' preferences, questionnaires at different times of the students' university experience as well as follow-up interviews with students who did and did not participate on study abroad programmes are necessary to gain a more holistic picture of the determining factors in Japanese students' decision to study abroad.

Keywords: Japanese University Students, Study Aboard, Scholarships

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Introduction

In March 2023, the Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, as part of the plans promulgated by the Council of the Creation on Future Education, declared that (aside from attracting 400,000 international students to Japan), the Government of Japan (GOJ) was setting a target of 500,000 Japanese students studying abroad by 2033 (Cabinet Secretariat, 2023). This target represents an over two-fold increase in the number of Japanese students sent abroad in 2019 which was 219,000 (British Council, 2023). This target has been called “ambitious” by some critics (Nash, 2023) and while a discussion of the attainability of 2033 target falls outside of the remit of this paper, it is pertinent to note that between 2023 and 2024, the number of Japanese studying abroad doubled and this was widely reported and commented upon by British Council (2024), Icef-monitor (2024) and Nash (2024). This importance of study abroad programmes (SAP) occurs not only at the national government level but also at the university level. It is common for Japanese universities to promote and utilise their partnerships with overseas universities to appeal to both potential students as well as the domestic and international community to enhance its appeal and to prove that it is active on an international scale. It is on this institution level that this paper focusses as it describes the changes made to the scholarship system offered by a medium-sized private university in Japan and the preferences shown by two cohorts of its first-year students in data collected in 2023 and 2024. This paper will now turn to a description of the institution in question and the reasoning behind the scholarship system change.

Institution in Question and Scholarship Systems: Old, New and Reasoning Behind Change

Institution in Question

The data was collected from first year students at a medium sized private university in western Japan. The university student enrolment averages around 6,200 students over four-year cohorts with each year group representing 25% of the total student body. The university has 32 partner universities in 15 countries and regions with Taiwan being considered as a region rather than a country following the GOJ’s maintenance of non-governmental, working level relations with Taiwan (Wikipedia, 2024). As the time of writing, in terms of ‘outbound’ SAPs, the university offered exchange programmes for either 6 or 12 months with 12 countries and programmes called ‘seminars’ offered at time-lengths: short term 1-10 weeks, medium term 3-6 months and long term 1 year. Differences between the exchange and the seminar programmes include:

1. on exchange programmes there is usually one or two places available per year with each institution
2. exchange programme participants must achieve a required level of the target language in order to be able to apply for the process (e.g. on TOEFL or IELTS for English or TOPIK for Korean) and in some cases a certain level of GPA from their home institution
3. exchange programme participants not only study the main language of the host institution but can also choose to study ‘regular’ classes in the target language
4. exchange programme participants are exempt from paying the host institution tuition fees as they paid the equivalent tuition at the home institution
5. ‘seminar’ programme participants overall do not have to achieve a pre-determined level of the target languages, although in some cases, a recommended level of ability is sometimes specified

6. 'seminar' programme participants classes are mainly language skill based although some seminars offer 'experiential' options such volunteer work in local schools, food banks and or senior citizen homes
7. also, these participants are required to pay both sets of tuition at the home and the host institution.

Therefore, it can be said that while exchange programme participants have the benefits of only paying one set of tuition, the required level of language ability is higher whereas seminar participants do not have that expectation, however, these latter students or the family are required to pay both sets of tuition. The reasoning for this is that for students to remain registered at their home institution then it is required of them to pay their tuition fees to maintain their 'seki' or registered place. For seminar students who take part in SAPs of over 3 months or more, this can be a considerable financial burden and off-putting for students who are considering studying abroad.

In terms of participants in both sets of programmes, the total number of students represented approximately 2-3% of the total student body in the period up to the COVID-19 pandemic but in 2020 there were no students sent aboard. While the SAP system reopened after 2021, the numbers of student participants has not reached half of the peak figures pre-2020 and have been between 0.7 and 1.1% of the total student body. The figures for the last 10 years are displayed in the Table 1 below.

Academic Year ¹	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total number of students	229	133	205	200	212	199	0	46	97	84	55 ²

Table 1: Total Number of Participants in Study Aboard Programmes

As can be seen the drop in participants was a concern for the institution and this along other reasons will be detailed below as explanations for the changes in the scholarship system.

Scholarship Systems: Old, New and Reasoning Behind Change

The institution in question had always awarded a non-return scholarship to participants in SAPs but had based its old system upon destination and length of time with fixed weekly, monthly, half-year and yearly amounts. However, as the costs of programmes rose especially those in the USA, the UK and New Zealand due to additional medical insurance and/or increased accommodations fees, it was felt that this was a deterrent to more students applying for exchange and long-term seminar programs. Additionally, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic i.e. reticence to travel or study aboard, seemed to be lasting longer than expected. Thus, it was decided to redesign the SAP scholarship system to increase the number of participants. It was recognised that the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were unlikely to dissipate quickly and while it was hoped that the levels of student participation in SAPs would approach those of pre-COVID-19 i.e. 3%, it was acknowledged that this was a longer-term goal.

¹ The Japanese academic year runs from April to end of March the following year. i.e. Academic year 2024 is from April 1st, 2024 to March 31st, 2025.

² This only represents the number of students up who went abroad up to August 2024. This number is expected to increase with the spring (February/March 2025) programmes.

The new scholarship system was based on an incentive principle in that the higher the level of the individual student's language ability (based on an officially recognised test score or number of foreign language credits earned at university) then the higher the amount awarded to them on a weekly basis. This amount was further delineated by the geographical area and the length of the programme.

The two scholarship systems are shown below in Table 2.

Old ~2023	Exchange programme	6 months			12 months			
		100,000			200,000			
		3 months+ All areas 30,000 per month						
Seminars	≤3 months	Asia 50,000			Aus / NZ / USA / Europe 100,000			
New 2024~	Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	
	All seminars & exchange programs	USA/UK/CAN/GER/FRA/SPA	10,000	12,000	14,000	16,000	18,000	20,000
		AUS/NZ/CZE/KOR/VTN/PHI	6,000	8,000	10,000	12,000	14,000	16,000
		MEX/CHI/TWN	4,000	6,000	8,000	10,000	12,000	14,000
	Seminars	All areas ≤ 3 Months	All 1 st years 50,000 (or more if their ‘stage’ is higher)					

Table 2: Old and New Scholarship Systems

As noted above there was a shift away from fixed amounts based on area and length of programme to a system of weekly amounts that vary between individual students. However, it was recognised that such a system might disadvantage first-year students as they might not have the foreign language ability of older or more experienced students and hence the level of officially recognised qualifications. Additionally, they would not have high number of foreign language credits due to their relatively short time studying at university. To compensate for this and to widen the appeal and hence the participation rate in studying abroad, a one-off fixed amount offered to all first-year participants in short-run programmes i.e. less than 3 months, might increase and heighten participation at an early stage in their time at university.

The system was also changed to encourage students to continue studying foreign languages post SAP return. As can be seen from the bottom of Table 2, it is possible for students to increase their 'stage' from 1 to 6 during their time at university and therefore, it is possible for students to increase the weekly amount that they could be awarded on a study abroad programme. This could be particularly beneficial to students who may be interested in participating in more than one programme over four years. In light of this, the new system allows for students for participate in more than one programme over their time at university and be awarded a scholarship for each. It is also possible for a student to participate in the same programme more than once and be awarded an increased weekly amount (should their level or 'stage' increase), however, as the kind and number credits concomitant with the programme is fixed and predetermined then those credits can only be awarded once to the student.

From above, it can be seen that the system offered a markedly different way of financial support compared to the previous system and as such it was possible to expect that this would

affect the students' study abroad preferences. Based upon this, research was carried out on two first-year cohorts and the research method is described below.

Research Method

The data was taken from two online questionnaires given in the form of Google Forms (See Appendix A.) in two consecutive years, 2023 and 2024. The questionnaires were made available to the first-year students after pre-entry orientation sessions. There were four sessions in total: one main session given and then one supplementary session given on the same day to those students who missed the main session due to a timetable clash with other orientation sessions. The questionnaire was accessed via a QR code at the end of each session in the same room as the explanation session and was completed by the students on their smart phone or tablets. The number of students who answered the questionnaire was 107 in 2023 and 99 in 2024. For each of the questions about language choice, destination choice, timing choice and programme type and length, the students were allowed to make multiple choices. As the questionnaires were taken before the students had started their studies proper i.e. before any classes or any specific SAP explanations sessions, their answers could only be seen as preferences rather definitive indications. As will be shown in the discussion below, even though the students' faculty and department were parameters asked to be completed, the students' names and student number were not collected and therefore it was not possible to identify the students' identity and remains so. However, it was possible to look at the students' preferences for SAPs in terms of language choice indication, country/region destination indication, timing indication as well as programme length and type. It is these five areas that the discussion now turns.

Discussion

Language Choice Indication

As can be seen from Table 3 below there was no change in both the top three and bottom three languages in terms of popularity. This is in keeping with expectations as English is the usually the first foreign language that Japanese students encounter in education as well as being the one language that is still widely used outside of education and the language that students are required to gain sufficient credits at university to graduate. The fourth and fifth languages swapped over between 2023 and 2024 and this could be attributed to a number of factors: a perceived worsening of relations between Japan and China over this time period as well as the growing appeal of Spanish within Japan that is driven by the continuing popularity of sports connected with Spanish speaking countries as well as the fact that from 2024 it was possible to offer an exchange programme with a Mexican partner university. From this point it is important to consider the countries and regions that the students displayed an interest in.

Language	English	Korean	French	Chinese	Spanish	German	Czech	Vietnamese
2023	94	44	28	27	23	14	1	1
2024	95	34	26	14	21	10	2	1

Table 3: Language Choice Indication

Country/Region Choice Indication

The figures displayed below in Table 4 show three trends:

1. Countries which can be described as Kachuru's 'inner circle' (Kachuru, 1992) remain popular for students. Despite the high costs that can be incurred by studying in these countries they are still the among the most popular places to go to.
2. South Korea and China were the most popular countries in both year groups although the drop in interest in China and increase in interest in Taiwan may be attributed to the reasons described above. However, it should be noted that more countries Asian countries selected in 2024 is in keeping with the findings reported by the British Council (2024) that the number of students interested in studying in Asian countries has already surpassed the pre-COVID-19 levels of 2019 and that an increase in countries such as the Philippines as a destination for studying English.
3. The interest in both Spain and Mexico can be attributed to relatively new establishment of new partners as well as the continuing interest in Spanish speaking culture especially on a sporting level as mentioned in language choice indication.

Apart from interest shown in the Philippines in 2024, it is hard to ascertain whether the change to the scholarship system influenced the students' preferences shown in language choice and destination choice. The timing, programme type and length of programme will be discussed next, and it will be shown that there are some indications that the changes to the financial support system might have affected these preferences.

Country	USA	Australia	Canada	UK	New Zealand
2023	105	52	42	36	33
2024	116	45	40	26	27

Table 4a: Country/Region Choice Indication: English L1 Countries

Country / Region	South Korea	China	Taiwan	Philippines	Mexico
2023	33	11	0	0	0
2024	22	6	5	4	2

Table 4b: Country/Region Choice Indication: Asia & Mexico

Country	France	Spain	Germany	Czech Republic
2023	22	11	16	3
2024	14	13	9	4

Table 4c: Country/Region Choice Indication: Europe

Timing Indication (1st ~ 4th Choice)

From the preferences shown in Table 5 below, three patterns can be seen. First, there is a slight increase in the number of students who would consider joining an SAP in their first year. This might be attributed to the fixed amount payment offered to all first years who take part on SAPs of less than 3 months. Second, most students would consider participating in their second year or third years which is in common with the findings of Potter and Potter (2020) which shows that most Japanese students choose these middle two years to avoid the pressures and conflicting timetables of studying abroad and looking for a job. Third, there is a distinct drop in the number of students who either consider an SAP in their fourth year or are

not sure when they would go. As noted directly above, the fourth year is seen as the time for looking for a job within Japan and the recruitment period is comparatively fixed and there is perceived concern of missing out on the chances of finding a job if a student participates in an SAP in their fourth year. Additionally, the drop of 22 students from 2023 to 2024 who expressed ‘I don’t know’ as an option can be seen as result of the potential increased financial support during their time at university and that students want to maximise their chances of receiving that additional funding. This is also borne out by the choices in the programme types and length of programmes.

Timing ‘Year’	1 st	2nd	3rd	4th	I don’t know
2023	37	76	52	9	25
2024	40	77	43	3	3

Table 5: Timing Indication (1st ~ 4th Choice)

Programme Type

There was a drop of 3 students who showed an interest in seminars between 2023 and 2024 whereas there was an increase of 7 students who showed an interest in exchange programmes over the same period. It can be surmised that these two patterns are related to financial issues. As noted above for students who take part in seminars, it is necessary for them to pay both the tuition at the host institution and the home institution in order that the student can retain their ‘seki’ or registered place. This means that for some students and their families, in addition to the approximately ¥1,000,000 home institution tuition, the SAP fee ranging from ¥250,000 for a 2-week programme to ¥4,000,000 for a year long programme needs to be paid. The financial burden of this is undeniable. In light of this, with the increased funding potentially available on the new scholarship scheme, some students might have thought the attractiveness of exchange programmes i.e. only having to pay the tuition of the home institution, was a greater incentive to aim for the exchange programmes. However, as noted above, participation in exchange programmes requires attainment of a pre-determined level or mark on an officially recognised language test and might be beyond the language ability of some students who therefore choose shorter seminars which overall do not have a minimum level of language ability laid down as a pre-requisite. It is to these seminars that the discussion now turns.

Type	Seminar	Exchange	I don’t know
2023	77	39	17
2024	74	46	11

Table 6: Programme Type

Programme Length

From Table 7 below it can be seen that the combined numbers of students who showed an interest in short- and medium-term programmes (2023: 95 and 2024:106) slightly increased. This may have been due to a combination of factors. The offer a fixed amount to all first years who participate in programmes of 3 months or less as well as potential to gain a larger per week amount and therefore total amount of scholarship for longer programmes. There was also a concomitant drop in the interest in long term programmes. As has been discussed earlier these programmes tend to be in English speaking countries in which post COVID-19 tuition and accommodation costs have risen sharply. Similarly, programmes that last for

nearly one year can be extremely expensive and, in some cases, the total costs can be 4-5 times the cost of year's tuition at the home institution. It can be reasonably interpreted that in the light of this knowledge, students are more likely to choose short- and medium-term seminar programmes and exchange programmes which can both maximise the amounts they can be awarded as well as lessen the costs to be burdened as much as possible.

Length	Short (2 weeks~ 3 months)	Medium (3~6 months)	Long (6 months+)	I don't know
2023	46	49	36	16
2024	55	51	33	5

Table 7: Programme Length

It can be seen from the result and the discussion above that there were some distinct changes and patterns in the students' preferences over the two years in focus and given that the only large-scale changes to the parameters to the overall study abroad system was that of the scholarship system and therefore it might be reasonably assumed that the changes to financial support affect students' SAP preferences. However, it must be noted that the data is limited in that it only focusses on the preferences of first year students from one university and at the very start of their time at university. In this way, the data and analysis offer a snapshot of the students' preferences at a particular time but remains important in what it reveals. To ascertain whether the influence of changes to financial support continues to have a similar effect over time then further investigation is necessary. This could include but not be limited to: similar questionnaires for 2025 and 2026 cohorts, follow-up questionnaires for 2023 and 2024 cohorts to investigate if their preferences have changed over time, follow-up questionnaires or interviews for students who did and did not take part in SAPs to determine what were the most influential factors in finalizing their decisions. Porter and Porter (2020) have shown that Japanese students' decisions to participate in SAP if often affected by other factors as well as financial issues such as lack of confidence in lingual abilities, a desire and feeling of responsibility to fulfil university sport or club activities, the relatively inflexible nature of the recruitment system in which time spent abroad might harm employment chances and finally, an unwillingness to spend time away from their family. All these factors should be taken into consideration for any further research and investigation.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the data and consequent findings, its relevance should not be overlooked. Changes in financial support, its availability and the method in which it is awarded seems to have less influence on destination choice and language studied but more influence on some parameters such as timing, programme type and length of programme. As indicated above the potential remains for more longitudinal investigation and a wider focus to consider other extraneous factors such as family and university sport or club pressures as well as employment concerns. The Government of Japan's declared target of 500,000 students studying abroad must be considered in context of not only students' language and other academic abilities and financial resources but also in the larger field of familial, peer and university pressures as well as university student recruitment schedules and employment chances immediately before and after graduation and in the long run, perhaps as long as the graduate is employed.

Appendix A

Questionnaire 2023 and 2024

1. Student Number
2. Cohort (Year)
3. Faculty / Department
4. Gender
5. Which languages are you interested in? (Choose up to 5)
6. Which countries/areas are you interested in going to? (Choose up to 9)
7. When do you want to study abroad? (1st/2nd/3rd/4th Year) (Choose up to 4)
8. For how long do you want to go for? (Choose up to 3)
9. What kind of programme are you interested in-seminar or exchange or I don't know? (Choose up to 3)
10. Please share your impressions of the explanation session today?

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