

Study Abroad and Scholarships: Are Student Preferences Affected by Performance Related and Determined Financial Incentives?

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Abstract

This paper looks at the differences in study abroad preferences of two cohorts of Japanese university first year students (2024: n99, 2025: n113). The reasoning for the research was to determine whether study abroad preferences were affected by the changes in underlying principles for scholarship awards, i.e. pre 2024: destination and time-period and 2024 onwards: destination, time-period and internationally or domestically recognised tests that assessed foreign language proficiency or the number of foreign language credits attained. The research shows three main areas; first, the 'weak yen' in 2024 led to a drop in a number of students going abroad; second, destination choice (English speaking countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the USA, the UK) as well as South Korea and China remain popular as do some European countries and consequently, the language choice follows suit (English, Korean, Chinese and French); third, students are more likely to go on short-term or medium-term programmes on either of their first two years at university but there is also a greater interest in exchange programmes due to the possibility of gaining greater funding. This consolidates findings in earlier research but there is a need for more longitudinal studies over a three-to-four-year period that investigates not only actual students who went abroad but also those didn't as well also incorporating other influencing factors such as self-perceived language ability, recruitment and employment prospects and familial ties.

Keywords: Japanese university students, international education, study abroad, scholarships

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Introduction

International education (IE) can be said to be seen as important and integral part of tertiary education in Japan on both a national and institutional scale. In 2023, the Government of Japan (GOJ) announced as part of the J-Mirai initiative, one of the main aims was to increase the number of “outbound students” i.e. students who study abroad, to 500,000 by 2033 (Cabinet Secretariat, 2023). This figure was targeted for several reasons which included: to match the levels of students going abroad from countries such as France and Germany. Furthermore, to develop “highly skilled professionals...support regional growth and development” and build “a diverse, inclusive, and sustainable society...boost(ing) Japan's growth and international competitiveness and contributing to world peace and stability” (ibid). In terms of concrete numbers for university students studying abroad, the 2023 target for long-term i.e. earning a degree overseas, was 150,000 and short-term or medium-term programmes was 230,000 with the 120,000 remainder being made up of high-school students. The overall figure of 500,000 represents a doubling of the level of pre-COVID 19 levels. This figure has been called both “ambitious” by some critics (Nash, 2023) and it is debatable whether it is appropriate to base future targets on historical achievements as the post COVID-19 state of IE is markedly different. A full discussion on the efficacy of this target goes beyond the remit of this paper, however, it will be touched upon again in the Conclusion on both the national and institutional level. It is to this institutional level that is paper now turns i.e. a description of the institution in question and the reasoning behind the scholarship system changes.

Main Body

This is the second in a series of papers that looks at to what extent the study abroad preferences of students attending a medium sized private Japanese are affected by a performance or credit determined scholarship system. James (2024) covered the three main areas:

1. The reasoning behind the scholarship change system change not only in terms of the potential benefits itself but also considering the GOJ's plans to double the number of “outbound students”
2. The changes in the number of the students who went on outbound programmes over a 10-year period and the factors that likely affected that
3. The results and consequent analysis of questionnaires to give to two cohorts of first-year students in 2023 and 2024 that described their preferences about studying abroad. Those preferences included:
 - a. Destination (country and region)
 - b. Languages interested in
 - c. Timing (which year or grade to study abroad in)
 - d. Length of preferred ideal programme
 - e. Kind of programme i.e. exchange programme or shorter term (less than 6 months)

As a continuation from that paper, this report will look at two main areas:

1. The numbers of students who went abroad on the first year (2024) of the new scholarship programme and the factors that may have affected those numbers
2. The results and analysis of questionnaires on study abroad preferences to a cohort of first-year students in 2025. As in James (2024) this set of results will be compared to

the previous year's (2024) set of results with accompanying analysis and interpretation

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

Institution in Question

The data was collected from two cohorts of first year students at a medium sized private university in the west of Japan. The total student enrolment averages between 6,300 and 6,500 students over four-year cohorts with each year group comprising approximately a quarter of the student body in total. At the moment of writing the university has 37 partner universities in 17 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). The study abroad programmes (SAPs) are sub-divided into two main types of "outbound" SAPs: university offered exchange programmes for either 6 or 12 months with 14 countries and programmes called 'seminars' offered at time-lengths: short-term of 2-10 weeks and medium-of term 3-6 months. Exchange and the seminar programmes differ according to the following distinctions:

1. On exchange programmes there is usually one or two places available each academic year with each partner institution
2. Exchange programme participants are required to attain a predetermined officially mandated level of the target language to be able to apply for the process (e.g. TOEFL or IELTS for English or TOPIK for Korean) and in some cases a certain level of GPA from their home institution is also required
3. Once sent aboard exchange programme participants register and take classes in the main language of the host institution but can also choose to study 'regular' subject classes with other students from the host institution
4. Exchange programme participants are not required to pay host institution tuition as they have paid the home institution tuition
5. For most but not all 'seminar' programmes, students do not have to achieve a predetermined level of the target language, however according to specifications of the host institution a recommended level of ability maybe occasionally required
6. Seminar programme participants classes are mainly language oriented although several seminars run hand in hand with such volunteer work in local primary schools, local parks and or as free tourist guides
7. Also, seminar participants are required to pay two sets of tuition fees both for the home and for the host institution.

From the above points it can be seen that exchange programme participants may have the advantage of being required of only paying tuition once to the home institution, however, being accepted onto the programme is perceived to be much more difficult as the limited number of spaces on each programme makes the rate of competition much higher as does the necessity to achieve the required level of language ability. By comparison, in most cases seminar participants do not have to fulfil a language expectation, yet these students or their family pay two sets of tuition. At the university in question, students who take part in seminar SAPs are required to pay tuition fees to maintain their registered place and ensure their status as a student. As far as students who take part in SAPs of over 3 months or more are concerned, the financial burden can be substantial i.e. an additional ¥500,000 or more per semester and therefore deters students from studying abroad.

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

Prior to 2024 the university under discussion operated a grant type scholarship system for participants in SAPs and had calculated the size of the grant based upon the destination and length of time with fixed weekly, monthly, half-year and yearly amounts. In the light of increased total programme costs particularly in several the core countries to study English i.e. the USA, the UK and New Zealand because of rises to additional medical insurance and/or increased accommodations fees, it was felt that this was a deterrent to students applying for exchange and long-term seminar programs. Additionally, post COVID-19 there was a marked reluctance to travel or study abroad which appeared to be having a longer-lasting effect than expected. As a result of this, the decision was made to fundamentally remake the scholarship system with the aim to increase the number of students going abroad. However, this decision was made bearing in mind that the long-lasting after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were unlikely to cede rapidly and that achieving the levels of pre-pandemic participation rates was unlikely to be reached soon and it was better to be perceived as a long-term goal of 4-5 years.

The post 2024 scholarship system was based on a 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 greater the weekly amount of awarded to them. This total programme amount was also determined by geographical area that the programme went to and the length of the programme in weeks.

The two scholarship systems are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1

Old and New Scholarship Systems (all figures are in Japanese yen)

Old and New Scholarship Systems (all figures are in Japanese yen)								
Old ~2023	Exchange programme			6	12			
				months	months			
				100,000	200,000			
	Seminars	3 months+ All areas 30,000 per month						
≤ 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)					

The move away from fixed amounts based on area and length of programme to a system of weekly amounts varying between individual students was seen to potentially work against first-year students as they would not have had as long as older students to increase their level or achieve better scores on internationally recognised language qualifications. Furthermore, they would have comparably fewer foreign language credits due to their shorter time at university. To off-set for this and to simultaneously broaden the appeal and increase the SAP participation rate, a one-time only fixed amount of ¥50,000 was to open all first-year participants in programmes of 3 months or less.

The new system was also based on incentivising students to carry on studying foreign languages post SAP return. The bottom half of Table 1 shows it is technically possible for students to increase their “stage” from 1 to 6 over their time at university and consequently increase the weekly amount that they could be awarded on an SAP. It was hoped that this would not only encourage students to continue studying on their return from their first SAP but might also potentially incentivise them to participate in more than one programme over four years. It was also made feasible for students to take part in the same programme more than once and be awarded a larger amount per week (should their level increase), however, credits attached to the programme would only be recognised by the university once.

It can be seen that the new system represented a profoundly different way of financial support compared to the previous system and as such it was possible to expect that this would have two effects:

1. Increase the number of students taking part in SAPs in general
2. Affect the students’ study abroad preferences in terms of destinations, languages, length and type of programme and which year or grade they choose study in

As can be seen form Table 2 below, in the period from 2014 to 2019 here was an average of 2-3.5% of the student body taking part in SAPs. Naturally during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 no students were sent abroad. Between 2021-2023, i.e. after the SAP system reopened, the number of student participants in SAPs was at between 0.7-1.5% the total student body. These low figures were a concern for the university in question. Furthermore, as the level of SAP participation fell from 2023, it would seem that the introduction of the new scholarship system had not had its desired effect.

Table 2

Total Number of Participants in Study Aboard Programmes

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	66

The surprising and disappointing drop in SAP participation can largely be attributed to the weak yen especially in relation to the US dollar which forced up the overall costs to studying abroad. This is borne out by examples of other universities. The Asahi Shinbun (2024) highlights the examples of students from Kwansei Gakuin University who either switched the SAP destination from Europe to Asia or gave up on the idea altogether. The Japan Times (2024) cites the experiences of Nagoya University students who “gave up on the idea of gaining overseas experience” in “significant” and “considerable” numbers.

It was noted above that it was not an immediate expectation for SAP numbers to return to pre-COVID-19 levels and a long-term view was taken to the SAP participation slowly returning to around 2-3% of the total student body. However, it was hoped that student preferences would be favourably affected in the coming years. This brings this paper to its second aim, a consideration of the results and analysis of questionnaires on study abroad

¹ The Japanese academic year runs from April to end of March the following year. i.e. Academic year 2025 is from April 1st, 2025 to March 31st, 2026.

preferences to a cohort of first-year students in 2024 and 2025 which will be preceded by a description of the methodology.

Methodology

The data was obtained from two online Google Forms based questionnaires (See Appendix A) in two consecutive years, 2024 and 2025. The questionnaires were given to and answered by those first-year students who voluntarily attended one of four pre-entry orientation sessions. Access to the questionnaire was given by QR code after each session finished the same room as the explanation session and the students completed and submitted them on their smart phone or tablets. The questionnaire was answered by 99 students in 2024 and 113 students in 2025.

The questionnaires were taken as a part of the pre-entry orientation in the period before classes had started and before any country or programme specific explanation sessions, therefore their answers should only be interpreted as indications rather than definitive choices. As can be seen in Appendix A, information on the students' faculty and department was collected, however, as students' names and student number were not, students' identity was and is unidentifiable. Questions concerning about language choice, destination choice, timing choice and programme type and length, allowed students to make multiple choices. Each of these five parameters will be covered in the discussion below.

Discussion

Language Choice Indication

Table 3 shows below there was no change in the top two (English and Korean) and bottom three (German, Czech and Vietnamese) languages in terms of popularity. This follows expectations as English is the usually the first foreign language that Japanese students encounter in formal education as well as being the language that is still widely used outside of education and the language that most students tend to study to gain the necessary number of credits at university to graduate. Korean is consistently the second most popular language due to the closeness of the South Korea to Japan as well as the wide appeal of Korean culture with young people. The 10-percentage point increase in interest in Spanish can be interpreted as showing that it is increasingly seen as a language option for university students due to the establishment of exchange partners in Spain and Mexico as well as a relatively low-cost short-term programme in Spain. The 16-point increase in interest in China shows that concern about studying in China post COVID-19 is lessening and the geographical proximity and intertwined history of the Japan and China means that students see the latter as a legitimate SAP option. The interest in French did not increase as much as for Spanish or Chinese, however, the relatively high level of interest can be attributed to the establishment of an exchange programme and short-term study programme in 2023. The doubling of the figures for both German and Czech can be seen as part of an overall interest in studying multiple languages especially those in Europe. The drop in interest in Vietnamese can be seen to be disappointing however it must be noted that it is not offered as a foreign language to study at the university in question. Given that there are multiple countries that languages e.g. English and Chinese, can be studied in, the discussion will move to preferences for countries and regions.

Table 3*Language Choice Indication*

Language	English	Korean	French	Chinese	Spanish	German	Czech	Vietnamese
2024	95	34	26	14	21	10	2	1
2025	102	55	29	30	31	20	4	0

Country/Region Choice Indication

The figures displayed below in Table 4a, 4b and 4c show three trends:

1. 4a. Countries which can be typified as traditional places to study abroad remain popular with students. The 19-point increase in the UK may be attributed to establishment of a new reputable university partner in London. However, these results must be qualified that these students are first years and that their interests are likely to be in keeping with more traditional destinations and that at this point they are unaware of the high cost of the programmes in these countries.
2. 4b. South Korea and China remained the two most popular countries in both cohorts although the doubling of interest in Taiwan may be attributed to the fact that it is seen as a viable alternative to China. The small drop in interest in the Philippines is hard to quantify as significant or not and might go against the trend on increasing interest in Asian countries (British Council, 2024) although any one single figure needs to be seen against a longitudinal backdrop. There appears to be a steady interest in Mexico which can be attributed to the sister partnership between a state in Mexico and a prefecture in Japan, visits by various organisations to the university in question from the same Mexican state as well as the acceptance of the first inbound exchange student from Mexico.
3. 4c. Interest in all four European countries grew from 2024 to 2025 which shows a widening of preferences outside of the traditional English and Asian areas. The establishment of partners in France and Spain may have helped pique interest in short-term and exchange programmes. Also, while the USA and other core English speaking countries remain popular (see Table 4a.) the relatively high level of English needed for exchange programmes can be inhibitive, thus, Germany and the Czech Republic become attractive as viable options due their comparatively low level of required English.

Despite the overall increase in interest across all languages and most destinations, it cannot be said that the change to the scholarship system had marked influence on the students' preferences. Contrastingly, as the following discussion will highlight, timing, programme type and length of programme preferences might have been affected by the changes to the financial support system.

Table 4a*Country/Region Choice Indication: Asia & Mexico*

Country	USA	Australia	Canada	UK	New Zealand
2024	116	45	40	26	27
2025	105	47	41	45	29

Table 4b*Country/Region Choice Indication: English L1 Countries*

Country / Region	South Korea	China	Taiwan	Philippines	Mexico
2024	22	6	5	4	2
2025	42	11	10	3	3

Table 4c*Country/Region Choice Indication: Europe*

Country	France	Spain	Germany	Czech Republic
2024	14	13	9	4
2025	31	22	19	9

Timing Indication (1st ~ 4th Choice)

Table 5 below, shows three patterns which will be described in turn. First, there is a 9-point increase in students who showed interest in taking part in an SAP in their first year. This can be attributed to the fixed amount payment offered to all first years who take part on SAPs of less than 3 month and an increased awareness of that. Second, the second year is still the most popular time that students consider participating in an SAP although this was 5 points less than 2024 which also might be attributed to increased interest in the fixed payment for first year students. The 10-percentage point drop in going in the third year might be an indication of students' preference for finding a job as early as possible however, this seems to be in contradiction to the increase in students who would consider studying abroad in their fourth year. When seen as a total over the third and fourth years, there was 5-point drop from 2024 (n46) to 2025 (n41) which seems to be in indicate that students are looking to take part in SAP earlier than before so that there is little conflict with looking for a job and employment prospects. Third, there is a marked rise of 8-points between 2024 and 2025 in the students who chose 'I don't know'. This can possible be seen as a part of general increase in options that students consider or as first years, they are still relatively undecided as to when is the most suitable time for them to take a part in an SAP. This can also be seen by their choices in the programme types and programmes length.

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

Timing 'Year'	1 st	2nd	3rd	4th	I don't know
2024	40	77	43	3	3
2025	49	72	33	8	11

Programme Type

Table 6 shows that there is an increase in all options from 2024 to 2025. As with the previous parameter this could be interpreted as showing that students are more likely to show an interest in both exchange programmes and shorter SAPs. As the student group under investigation are first years then the increase in seminar programmes might be attributed to the one-off payment as well as the possibility of being to increase the amount of the scholarship over time and as result of increasing their level i.e. they are incentivised to improve. This latter reason could also be attributed to the increase in the number of students

interested in exchange programmes. As noted in the introduction, participation in exchange programmes necessitates achieving a pre-required level of language ability. If the nature of the scholarship programme is that the higher the level that the students achieve, the greater the amount of scholarship can be attained, then students are more likely to consider an exchange programme even with high participation barriers. With the current system being clearly delineated in terms of what level earns what amount and what level indicates which programme can be applied for then students have a clear target to aim for. Additionally, as exchange programme participants only have to pay one set of tuition then an increased number of students might have considered exchange programmes as possible options. As highlighted above, it should be noted that exchange programme participation necessitates achieving a pre-determined level or score on an internationally ratified language test and therefore could be beyond some students' language ability who as result select shorter SAPs which mostly do not have a pre-required minimum level of language ability. It is to these seminars that the discussion now turns.

Table 6*Programme Type*

Type	Seminar	Exchange	I don't know
2024	74	46	11
2025	80	52	15

Programme Length

Table 7 shows that there appears to be an overall increase in interest in types of programmes according to length. Also, there seems to a pattern of the shorter the programme, the more people are likely to consider it as an option for a SAP. This could be reasoned to be based upon: first, the one-off payment offered to all first years and second the longer the programme, the more expensive it becomes not only for the programme itself but also for other costs as well e.g. the host institution tuition which also must be paid for the student to maintain their registered place at the university. Post COVID-19 SAP costs have increased especially due to rises in tuition and accommodation costs and naturally the longer the programme, the greater the burden of these becomes. Additionally, SAPs over six months would incur two sets of host tuition payment which is approximately ¥1,000,000. Combined with a similar or even greater amount for the SAP itself, students will tend to select short- and medium-term seminar programmes and exchange programmes which can both optimise the scholarship amount and lessen the burden of the costs in general.

Table 7*Programme Length*

Length	Short (2 weeks~ 3 months)	Medium (3~6 months)	Long (6 months+)	I don't know
2024	55	51	33	5
2025	66	56	35	11

From the results of the questionnaires and the consequent discussion above it appears there were some changes in students' preferences and that those differences can be partly attributed to the scholarship system introduced in 2024. Importantly, it should be noted that the change to the system itself was not only the "financial" factor that affected the SAP patterns. In 2024, the weakness of the yen seemed to have deterred many students from

studying abroad and hence the total number of students went down from 84 in 2023 to 66 in 2024. This has forced has other universities to consider “IE” to longer just mean “International Education” but also “Intercultural Education” and to increase the opportunities for classes that that have both international and domestic students (Yamamoto Rosenbaum & Iwaki, 2025).

In terms of potential future participants, it would seem that some parameters are likely to be more affected by the nature of the scholarship system than others. Destination choices do not seem to be overly affected and that the core English countries as well as South Korea and China remain popular with some growing interest in European countries. Similar patterns can be found language choices in the continued popularity of English, Korean, Chinese but with European languages, especially French, growing in its appeal. There was some noticeable growth in interest in short-term and medium-term programmes and exchange programmes which can be arguably attributed to increased funding for first year students and the potential for increased scholarship amounts for exchange programmes. Yet, as James (2024) pointed “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 order to better determine the degree to which changes to the scholarship system continues to have a similar effect over time then prolonged and widened investigation is required. This should incorporate:

1. an analysis of the number of students on SAPs from 2025~2027
2. post-return interviews and questionnaires for students who went abroad and those who did not to determine what, if anything, deterred them
3. carrying out the same questionnaires for first year cohorts in 2026 and 2027

While this paper has focussed on the financial influences on the decision to go study abroad or not, critics have highlighted other factors shown that Japanese students’ decisions to participate in SAPs. Porter and Porter (2020) argued that other factors such as low confidence in lingual abilities, a desire and feeling of responsibility to take part in university sport or club activities, the comparatively inflexible nature of the recruitment system where periods studying abroad might be deleterious to finding job and finally, a reticence to spend prolonged time away from their family. Any further research and investigation should also consider these parameters when discussing the decision to study abroad.

Conclusion

This paper has consolidated the findings of the first paper in this series in that when considering the decision to study abroad or not some parameters are more greatly influenced by the scholarship system. Destination choice and language studied are unlikely to be influenced whereas timing, programme type and length of programme are. Despite the shortcomings of the data and its analysis i.e. one university, the findings remain relevant as indications of potential future study abroad patterns. A wider and more holistic approach to consider other factors such as language ability, recruitment anxieties, university club and familial concerns should also be incorporated to gain a more a more comprehensive and accurate appraisal of the students’ decision to study abroad.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Questionnaire 2024 and 2025

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