# Possibilities and Constraints of Fostering Deeper Study Abroad Experiences: The Lived Experiences of 50 Years of US Students in Japan

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#### Introduction

The number of US students studying abroad has more than doubled since the turn of the twenty-first century, from 154,168 in 2000–2001 to 332,727 in 2016–2017 (Institute of International Education 2010, 2018). This exponential increase reflects the growing recognition by higher education institutions and the federal government on the importance of providing international experiences to cultivate skills for a global competitive economy (Whatley 2018). In the US, study abroad is often used to refer to credit-seeking international mobile students enrolled in a higher education institution outside of the US. Credits earned abroad are usually used towards their academic degree at their home institution. Duration varies in length and includes short-term study abroad (typically eight weeks or less), midlength study abroad (one semester or one or two quarters), and long-term study abroad (academic or calendar year). As the overall percentage of US students studying abroad in Europe declined from 62.9% in 2001–02 to 54.4% in 2016–17, the percentage going to Asia increased from 6.8% to 11.6%. Despite the prominence of China as a destination country for American students from the late 1990s onwards and the emerging popularity of South Korea in recent years, Japan's relevance as a leading historic destination remains, as its numbers more than doubled from 3,168 in 2001–2002 to 7,145 in 2016–2017.

With the rise of US students studying abroad, it is important to understand the mechanisms of how study abroad experiences can create opportunities to integrate into the host society and develop intercultural understanding. This paper examines how the design of a study abroad program and historical organizational changes may assist or hinder integration into the host society, based on 25 qualitative in-depth interviews with one-year and one-semester participants from the 1960s to 2010s on a select US study abroad program in Japan.

## **Examining Study Abroad Impacts, Integration, and Program Design**

Studying abroad is expected to contribute to the development of a graduate who can operate in an increasingly globalized interdependent world while navigating new opportunities and challenges (Asada 2019; Murphy et al. 2014). For example, the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) Abroad 50-Year Alumni Survey found that the study abroad experience has a long-lasting impact on academic, professional, and personal lives of participants for up to 50 years (Dwyer 2004). Moreover, longer durations of study abroad resulted in a larger impact. Meanwhile, the Study Abroad for Global Engagement (SAGE) Project found that a study abroad program that provided a deeper experience and countries with larger cultural distance influenced participants to pursue internationally-oriented advanced degrees and careers (Paige et al. 2010).

But what makes a study abroad experience influential on participants' lives? The SAGE Project indicated the "4Ds of Study Abroad" to understand how integration into the host society influences the outcomes of study abroad, namely demographics, duration, destination, and depth of program. Young (2014) proposed a working definition of integration

for the context of international higher education: "Integration is an intentional process to create community, by encouraging domestic and international students to engage with each other in ongoing interaction, characterized by mutual respect, responsibility, action, and commitment" (1).

Recent research suggests that institutions and social networks influence the integration of international students (Rienties and Tempelaar 2013). Students studying abroad often navigate new and unpredictable encounters in a landscape of new cultural and physical environments as outsiders without support from their family and social networks from their home countries (Sawir et al. 2008). They may face difficulties as they react to the new academic, social, and emotional terrains of the study abroad destination (Gebhard 2012). Research finds that international students often experience social isolation and difficulties integrating and forming relations within the host society (Page and Chahboun 2019). Jean-Francois (2019) suggested that institutional support is needed to assist international students' social and academic integration because, otherwise, individual students are left to their own determination to navigate the host society and rely on their own intercultural strategies. Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2019) argued that integration efforts at the student level (e.g., student interaction opportunities, engagement with experimental learning, and adaptation to new academic norms), community level (e.g., student societies, social and academic events at departments, and intercultural training for staff), and institution level (e.g., anticipation of student needs, interactive social spaces creation, and support center development) are interconnected.

Building upon Young's definition of the integration of international students, this study examines academic and social integration at formal and informal levels (e.g., Severiens and Schmidt 2009; Severiens and Wolff 2008). Specifically, this holistic approach aims to understand how study abroad program design elements contribute to or hinder integration into the local student community and the wider host society. Elements may include target language competence, extent of target language used abroad, context of academic work, living arrangements, provisions for structured cultural interaction and experiential learning, and guided reflection on learning (Engle and Engle 2003).

# Methodology

This study focuses on how curricular and noncurricular elements of a select study abroad program can potentially contribute to the integration into the host society from the participant's perspective. This is achieved by examining the lived experiences of US study abroad students who studied in Japan for one year or one semester from the 1960s to 2010s. While most participants tend to have at least one semester of Japanese language instruction prior to their study abroad, they represent a mix of academic disciplines including not only Japan, Asia, and international-related majors but also social sciences majors.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews aimed to provide in-depth understandings of the mechanisms of study abroad program design and its role in international students' integration into the host society during the study abroad experience. Interviews were conducted in English from March to July 2013 in the US and Japan. Twenty-five participants were selected based on a combination of purposive sampling (study abroad timeframe and participant demographics) and convenience sampling (participant availability and interview locations). Nine of the interview participants were female and 16 were male. Eighteen of the participants identified as Caucasian, five as Asian, and two as African American. Four of the participants studied abroad in the 1960s, three in the 1970s, three in the 1980s, seven in the 1990s, and eight in the 2000s. After receiving informed consent, the interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. Themes explored in the interviews are guided by Engle and Engle (2003) and included experiences related to living arrangements, academic experiences, social experiences, participation in the service learning program, and interactions with the study abroad program office. The verbatim transcriptions were analyzed with a grounded theory approach. In addition, negative case analysis was undertaken to understand possible difficulties in integrating into the host society.

#### **Results**

The following sections discuss the key study abroad program elements that emerged out of the interviews as being connected to participants' integration into the host society: on-site administrative staff, curricular design, noncurricular design, service learning opportunities, and unintended consequences.

# On-Site Administrative Staff

The respondents identified the on-site administrative staff as a resource to ease transition into a new country and receive guidance on curricular and noncurricular matters. The on-site administrative staff consist of one program coordinator, a bilingual Japanese national who resides in Japan at the host institution, who oversees the administrative duties of the program. In addition, there is a rotating one-year resident director who is a faculty member from an American college that offers academic and intercultural guidance to students. Beverly shares how the on-site administrative staff provide guidance for experiences inside and outside of the classroom.

Do you know them [the program coordinator and resident director]? They were amazing anytime I had questions. About class registration, host family problems, I'd stop by the office and get some advice. (Beverly, 1960s Participant)

In light of growing student needs in the twenty-first century, a part-time program assistant was added to the staff to provide administrative support to the office and daily life guidance for the students. The findings suggest that the structure of the study abroad program and its on-site administrative staff play an essential role in the participants' study abroad experience through providing guidance and support to participants to regularly engage, process, and reflect on their lived learning experiences (Enns 2016).

#### The Connection of Curricular Design to Deeper Integration into Japanese Society

Interviewed respondents reported that the curricular design of intensive Japanese language classes complemented by English-based academic coursework about Japan allowed them to develop the skills and knowledge to integrate into the host country. The curricular experience provided a foundation to connect with host nationals in noncurricular activities, such as living with a host family, joining student clubs, and participating in a service learning program. Through these activities, they felt a deeper connection to the host society and culture. Jason explains the connection between his classroom experience and his lived experiences outside of the classroom as follows:

The Japanese classes were really good. Since I did like extracurricular stuff and like joined an orchestra and had to interact with Japanese students a lot, my Japanese got a lot better. And on the service learning program, too. So there were a lot of things that weren't part of the coursework that were part of the program that did help. (Jason, 2000s Participant)

Organizational changes at the host institution also influenced respondents' opportunities for integrating with the local student community in classroom experiences. From the 1960s to early 2000s, limited opportunities existed for participants to interact with Japanese students in class. Participants were associated with an island program at the host institution, which provided academic coursework in English to non-degree seeking international students from around the world. Harold, who studied abroad in the 1960s, comments that "there were no Japanese students in our classes." The 1960s was also a turbulent time that witnessed student movements across Japanese universities (see Krauss 1988). Patricia, a participant in the late 1960s, shares that classes were temporarily moved to a location further from campus

because of student protests: "Even away from the campus, we could hear the protesters shouting as we were learning Japanese. It was quite surreal." Later, Alexander, a participant in the 1990s, explains, "there might be one or two Japanese students that just returned from studying abroad in a class. But, it was hard to really talk since they were always rushing to their next class across campus."

In the mid-2000s, the island program evolved into a full-fledged degree-granting undergraduate school. Accordingly, more opportunities arose in the classroom to form personal connections with host nationals. Steven provides examples of how the increase in Japanese students resulted in closer social networks due to class assignments and naturally occurring conversations.

I made a number of Japanese friends in classes. Sometimes we'd be doing an assigned group project and then just end up hanging out sometimes. Or, like, I'd just randomly strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to me before the bell rang. One good Japanese friend I made that way. We started to talk and found out we both liked the same things. (Steven, 2000s Participant)

# Noncurricular Design as a Door into the Host Society

Of the 25 interview respondents, 23 respondents emphasized forming close relationships with host nationals through noncurricular experiences while studying abroad, primarily through living with a host family and participating in student clubs. Social networks may be formed both prior and during study abroad experiences (Van Mol and Michielsen 2015). The findings of this study suggest the formation of social networks primarily occurs during the study abroad experience. The study abroad program generally requires participants to live with host families. Host families were identified by all participants as a central study abroad element that contributed to their development and renewed commitment to Japanese language, society, and culture. Stephanie highlights below the role of being a member of her host family, rather than just a guest, in opening the door into Japanese society, culture, and language.

[My home stay experience] was the biggest thing... I mean I took away, you know, the language skills and learning about culture and things like that, but yeah, it was like I'd have not just my host family, but my host mom's sisters and my host mom's parents and like it was—I had a whole family, a whole network. (Stephanie, 2000s Participant)

Student clubs are also central to integrating with the local student community in Japan. For local and international students alike, student clubs provide a space to form social networks. About half of the program participants join a student club (Asada 2020). Student clubs provided an informal space to better understand and be a part of Japanese society. Eugene (1980s Participant) shared how being a student club member allowed him to partake in typical student life primarily in Japanese and form close relationships with host nationals. As Brandon explains below, student clubs allowed a first-hand opportunity to be a part of Japanese society and its hierarchy system.

Compared to the US, my student club was a very different experience. It was very structured. A lot of hierarchy within the club. You know, you have like your *senpai* [senior], your *kohai* [junior] and that was sort of my first interaction with that hierarchy in Japan was through that club. (Brandon, 2000s Participant)

However, participants experienced challenges in joining student clubs. The interview respondents' arrival in September rather than the standard student club member recruitment period at the beginning of the Japanese academic calendar in April made it difficult to join clubs. Moreover, the sheer number of student clubs (around 600 in 2017) and club guidebooks offered predominately in Japanese presented additional hurdles. On-site program staff provided guidance to those unable to navigate Japanese fluently. Alisa's (1990s Participant) hope to join a student club was met with obstacles to find an appropriate fit. One of her motivations for joining a student club was to improve her Japanese

language ability. However, she comments that "some international students couldn't really speak Japanese, so everyone was using English." Moreover, Alisa, echoed by others, found the prominent alcohol culture off-putting. This culture stems from the prevalence among Japanese university students to use a *nomihodai* (all you can drink) system, a fixed price (generally around \(\frac{1}{3}\),000) to drink unlimited alcohol drinks for two to three hours (Kawaida et al. 2018). In student club activities, it is normal to participate in *nomihodai* dinners after club activities.

The ease of joining student clubs have increased over time. Interview respondents from the 1960s to 1980s viewed student clubs as generally unwilling to accept international students and having greater barriers to joining student clubs. However, interview respondents from the 1990s to 2010s shared how they felt they had more options for student clubs. This corresponds to internationalization efforts and an increasing number of international students at the host institution. Moreover, the host institution introduced student club recruitment fairs and information brochures in English at the fall intake of international students. However, the student clubs represented are small self-selective groups who desire to recruit international students.

# Service Learning Program

One of the unique features of the study abroad program is its unique one-month service learning program that has existed since the program's inception in the 1960s. The mandatory service learning program for one-year participants allows them to experience living in an area outside of Tokyo to be fully immersed in Japanese language and culture while participating in activities with the host community and living with a host family. Interview respondents described the service learning program as assisting them in integrating into the the host society. The Japanese language acquired through in-classroom Japanese language instruction at their home institution and host institution was based on standard Japanese. The service learning program allowed them to gain comparative understandings of the host country, society, and culture by encountering first-hand linguistic and sociocultural differences within Japan. When James (1990s Participant) recalls his experience, he reflects on the comparative view of Japan he gained: "It is just a persistent reminder that there's—there's another dialect of Japanese outside of the standard language...Another Japan." Stephanie shares how integrated with the community she felt during the one-month service learning program.

I'd visit the neighborhood elementary school, assist the teachers in the classroom, and eat lunch with the students. You know, I learned so much through that. So that was just the feeling of belonging there and not just feeling like this random foreigner stuck in a Japanese family and visiting some school. (Stephanie, 2000s Participant)

# **Unintended Consequences**

The study abroad program elements discussed are not a panacea for integration into the host society. Michael highlights the potential conflicts of how the curricular program design with elements of academic coursework primarily in English rather than in the host language may hinder integration into the host society.

[My graduate level study experience in Japan completely in Japanese] was a great, positive experience... I was like, I should have done this the first time. I should not have gone as an undergrad because, we did all the classes in English and sure I studied some Japanese, but it wasn't as immersive. (Michael, 1990s Participant)

Furthermore, the sociocultural differences between the US and Japan that contribute to a larger impact can also have the unexpected consequence of pushing participants away from the host society. One key mechanism for navigating challenging intercultural situations is the participants' social support systems and networks, both formal and informal, at home and in the host country, that provide space for them to navigate and unpack lived learning experiences. Earlier cohorts of interview respondents often lost their home support networks of family, friends, and

community during the study abroad experience (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008), mostly due to expensive international calls and time lag of postal mail. From the late 1990s onward, the availability of the internet enabled respondents to maintain connections with home support networks through email and voice calls. In some cases, social support systems were not sufficient to overcome sociocultural differences and hindered integration. Monica shares below the difficulties she had with her first host family in Tokyo and the role social networks played in her decision to move to a new host family. Based on parental advice, she decided to move out instead of attempting to overcome the difficulties she was having with her host family. Importantly, her decision process shows how social support networks in the host country and home country can be at odds with how to deal with challenging intercultural situations.

I actually left my original host family for another host family around March... My friends listened and tried to help. I went and asked for help from the office. It was just cultural. I ended up moving out... My mom back home said I should get on with my life. I just didn't want to deal with it anymore. (Monica, 2000s Participant)

# Conclusion

Study abroad programs can be designed to facilitate integration into the host society. The findings presented in this paper contribute to our empirical knowledge on how internationally mobile students experience academic and social integration during their time abroad. According to the lived experiences of the interview respondents, curricular design promotes a high level of formal learning of the host language as well as an intellectual knowledge base of the host society. Meanwhile, noncurricular design is particularly helpful for providing opportunities for participants' integration into the local student community and wider host society. Furthermore, on-site administrative staff provide organizational and educational support to participants to ease their integration into a new country (McKeown 2012) and actively engage students in guided reflection that increases intercultural competences (Hammer 2012). The study's time span of nearly 50 years identified program and host institution organizational changes in response to student needs and internationalization aspirations as increasing integration opportunities during the study abroad experience.

In light of increasing diversity of the US study abroad participants (Institute of International Education 2010, 2018), the SAGE Project's findings regarding a larger cultural difference leading to a larger impact needs to be reexamined. Depending on the individual cultural practices and values of students and their similarities and differences with the host country, they may have different experiences adjusting and adapting while studying abroad (Tempelaar et al. 2012). In informal conversations with respondents following the interviews, the topic of student diversity arose. In particular, several respondents were curious if new support systems exist to support diversity. The study abroad program's homepage now dedicates a section to diversity abroad. Further research needs to be conducted to draw empirical conclusions due to the limited scope of the present study. However, the informal conversations with respondents suggest scholars and practitioners of study abroad need to challenge assumptions and acknowledge that what one student views as disruptive to their monocultural or ethnocentric mindset may well be different from another. Moreover, the increased diversity of study abroad participants calls upon study abroad program practitioners to reconsider their program design and support systems to promote access and inclusion by acknowledging that diverse participant backgrounds can influence their experiences in integrating in the host society.

Deliberate study abroad program design provides opportunities for integration into the host society and guidance during study abroad plays an important role in assisting participants in overcoming intercultural challenges. However, there is also the risk of over-engineering a personal experience and creating a culture of dependency. Participants need to gain skills to independently navigate sociocultural differences. If the ultimate goal of study abroad is fostering individuals with the intercultural skills to navigate a complex, global world, a balance between formal guidance and

creating an atmosphere conductive to independent self-reflection to successfully navigate and integrate into the daily life of the host society is needed.

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