

## Studying Abroad at ‘Home’: Going to Japan in New Zealand

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the experiences of a group of Japanese study abroad students in response to the purposeful replication of a Japanese environment by the New Zealand-based institution where they studied. Data were collected from 12 students via interviews spread over approximately 20 months, and revealed that management provided specifically for the Japanese students, isolating them from other groups within the college in different ways, which is contrary to frequently cited study abroad objectives. Some initial resistance by participants gave way to acceptance, demonstrated through personal activities which propagated the institution’s Japaneseness and an appreciation of management’s efforts to provide them with a familiar living and studying environment. The study provides insight into a specific study abroad site unusual in the overtly placed limitations on processes of integration, and subsequent participant responses to that. In doing so, it contributes to the recognition of the diversity of ways in which study abroad may occur.*

**Keywords:** home replication, identity, Japanese international students, study abroad

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### INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad has traditionally been based on an assumption of separation, where students “enter a new culture that is theoretically separate from their home culture” (Mikal & Grace, 2012, p. 288). Thus, going from somewhere like Tokyo to study in New Zealand might be expected to produce a feeling of being in a completely new environment. However, the reality can differ, often due to students seeking out the comfort of social networks composed mainly of co-nationals (Ayano, 2006). In the Japanese-owned tertiary institution where this article is set, resistance to separation from the familiar was built into the institutional infrastructure rather than emanating from student choice. Public statements from representatives of the owners indicated an intention, thus, to protect students from the discomfort of culture shock by preserving an ambiance that produced familiarity. This article reports on how a group of Japanese students studying there reacted to the measures the institution took.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Study Abroad**

The term “study abroad” has often been interpreted narrowly to refer to international students studying overseas for a short period only. However, we have chosen a more encompassing interpretation aligned with Andrade (2006, p. 132), who stated that study abroad can also include “relocating to a different nation to complete a degree,” because there are elements in our study context that are not entirely typical. Significant reasons for students to embark on a study abroad have often been considered to increase their proficiency in a second language (L2), gain intercultural competence, and expand cultural knowledge. Concerning the first, perhaps because of what Coleman (2015) refers to as “folk linguistics,” the assumption is that the immersion which “underpins the whole notion of study abroad” (p. 34), together with formal classroom tuition, will enable students to soak up the L2 like a sponge (Tanaka, 2007). Shadowen et al. (2015) add that simply the experience of studying and living in another culture gives students opportunities for learning and development “above and beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge at the home campus” (p. 231). The ‘above and beyond’ has often been seen to include intercultural competence, with studies designed to tease out how it is facilitated or hampered (e.g. Kishino & Takahashi, 2019). For example, Nishioka and Akol (2019) suggest study abroad “creates unique opportunities to immerse oneself in a different society and culture and also challenges one to quickly adjust to a new environment” (p. 815). Coleman (2015) supports a broader view of potential gain, including greater confidence, flexibility, and openness to new experiences.

### **Study Abroad Students Settling In**

A considerable weight of literature, however, indicates that this dreamed-of immersion in the new does not always occur because of a coping mechanism to the shock of the unfamiliar. When international students find themselves in foreign sociocultural environments, their sense of identity is challenged (Block, 2007; Kim, 2001). These challenges may be greater for students whose culture is most distant from the host culture (Campbell & Li, 2008). Ye (2006, p. 3) concluded that of all international students studying in the USA, Asian students need the most effort to adapt because they have the most prominent social distance from the hosts. Certainly, when Asian students move to the West, they are moving into a completely different social structure and a different teaching and learning framework while also having to overcome language issues (Thakur & Hourigan, 2007, p. 45). As Krishna (2019) asserts, the literature tends to paint a picture of institutions requiring study abroad students to adapt to the way we do things “‘here’ to be successful” (p. ii).

The initial period in a foreign environment, as individuals struggle to position themselves, appears to be the peak point of stress (Gündüz & Alakbarov, 2019; Mikal et al., 2013) when the psychological challenge can compromise academic learning and even general wellbeing. For example, one of Ayano's (2006, p. 16) Japanese research participants studying in the U.K. felt as if he was "living in a small cage" and used the imagery of "being held down by a muddy rice field" to describe his despair. Therefore, robust support systems can be critical for international students to transition into their new living environment away from family and friends (Ye, 2006).

An essential coping mechanism during this period is support from the familiar. On a macro level, Mok, Wu and Yu (2014, p. 144) found that some countries may be more "homelike" than others, and for that reason, they may be more popular with some students. One of their research participants claimed that Malaysia was comfortable "to every nationality" due to its weather, hospitality, and culture; the last factor was particularly pertinent to Muslim students when compared to other countries, such as China, Taiwan, or Singapore. On a micro level, Gebhard (2012) found that all the students in his extensive study coped initially by using reminders of their home culture, such as photos on the wall. Coleman (2015) indicates that initial social networks built by students often lean heavily on co-nationals. This is understandable since Kishino and Takahashi (2019) highlight the importance of developing a sense of belonging for better achievement in study abroad, and Gündüz and Alakbarov (2019) found that feeling safe was the most crucial factor for successful adaptation. However, the literature also reflects an expectation that for optimal benefits from study abroad, these networks will eventually expand to include other internationals, and in some cases, locals (e.g., Coleman, 2015). Nevertheless, positive benefits, such as psychological wellbeing, have been associated with continued co-national networks (Hafeeza & Pazil, 2019; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

Some institutions have promoted co-national ties amongst international students, particularly through on-campus living arrangements. Cammish (1997) warns against housing co-nationals together because these students are slower at improving their English, struggle more to integrate into the host country, and have difficulty making local friends. Ogden (2007) indicates that one institutional response to US students' wish to shy away from unfamiliar local conditions has been to reduce immersion by reconstructing aspects of the home environments, which place students on a "veranda" (p. 41), where they can see the new environment, but are protected from it. He asserts that they must be lured off this veranda to provide the intended "truly transformative experience" (p. 39).

### **Japanese Views of Studying Abroad and Repatriation**

Perhaps Japanese students studying abroad should be considered special cases because, as mentioned previously, the literature places them within a group that struggles more than many others when studying in Western countries (Thakur & Hourigan, 2007; Ye, 2006). Sato and Hodge (2015), studying Japanese students at an American university, found that struggles to integrate with local students stemmed from factors such as perceived linguistic barriers and a lack of shared cultural understandings leading to awkwardness in interactions. They therefore, "mostly socialized with Japanese friends because they were much more comfortable with other Japanese peers and found such interactions more enjoyable" (p. 215).

A particular issue that has arisen concerning this group is the question of repatriation and how welcome indications of cultural adaptation may be when students return to Japan. Cammish (1997) posited that countries such as Japan "want their young people to learn English for instrumental reasons, they do not want them to acquire at the same time the cultural baggage which may come with it" (p. 144). And even as

recently as 2009, Sugihashi reported in her research that Japanese study abroad returnees from the U.S. still struggle to (re)fit into Japanese culture.

What the literature reveals, then, is a strong assumption that immersion in the host community and connections with other internationals who have joined it are a strong predictor of an optimal experience of study abroad. Shadowing this, though, is an awareness that these connections are not always easy to make and that they may come at the expense of struggles. However, what we see as interesting in the current study is that it provides a detailed account of study abroad in an ambiance that resists this view, not attempting to create a New Zealand immersion experience but maintaining considerable elements of the home community.

### **INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH**

This article reports on aspects of doctoral research carried out by the first author in a Japanese-owned private tertiary institution in New Zealand, which we have called Global Family College (GFC). Early observation revealed many elements that gave an overtly Japanese stamp to the experience, which became an object of interest in the semi-structured interviews that formed the basis of the study. Research questions pertaining to this aspect of the study were developed to gain an understanding of the effects of replicating a home environment for study abroad students in a tertiary institution:

1. What were the main elements within the college that made it feel Japanese?
2. What was the attitude of the Japanese students towards the college's Japaneseness?
3. Was the Japaneseness of the college an affordance or a limitation in the students' evaluation of their experience?

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Participants and Setting**

The everyday living experiences of 12 Japanese students, six males, and six females, aged 17 to 21, provide the foundation of this paper. They were part of a group of approximately 40 who came to New Zealand to study for an undergraduate degree at GFC. The student body of GFC was made up of a minority of local students, generally there due to their interest in Japan and international students from a wide range of countries. Many students, including nine of the cohort here, were recent graduates from a group of associated private Japanese high schools. It is worth highlighting that these high schools were not in the top academic tier in the competitive Japanese system. In many cases, they catered to socially withdrawn and sensitive students, which may have influenced GFC's rather essentialist measures for supporting them. That said, there were no noticeable differences in experiences found in this study vis-à-vis the participants who attended Japanese public schools. The general motivation of the cohort was to get both life experience and, as their pre-arrival questionnaires indicated, an education that was not available to them in Japan (due to their secondary school results and the competitive nature of tertiary education in Japan).

Study at GFC was in three stages, foundation, diploma, and degree. All students in this study entered the foundation for the first six months or year and graduated to degree level on achieving a satisfactory English score during this research. Although they remained for a relatively long period (approximately three years), we have used the term 'study abroad' in discussing these students, as mentioned in the literature review. The participants here were not part of a discernible minority within a

mainstream domestic educational institution, as is often the case with international students, but were part of the majority cohort in GFC.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of a pre-arrival questionnaire to understand the students' attitude toward studying abroad, followed by six post-arrival interviews with each student over a period of approximately 20 months. This longitudinal interview-based approach allowed the participants' stories to build upon themselves over time, filling information gaps as they became evident, and creating a strong basis of understanding of each participant's experiences, interpretations, adjustments, while also breathing life and humanity into the text. The rationale behind such a high number of interviews over this time was to closely observe the evolution of each student's life in what was expected to be a rich period of change. Although information on the students' academic and L2 achievements were gathered, they are not the focus of this article.

Ethics applications were accepted by the university's human ethics committee where the doctoral study was undertaken and GFC, where the first author was both teacher and researcher. Selection of participants from nearly 40 who responded to the call for volunteers was based on students not being in the first author's classes during the research period, and having the highest English-speaking abilities (according to GFC's entry tests) because this research relied heavily on communication in spoken English due to the researcher's low Japanese proficiency. Nevertheless, the information provided to the students before their commitment to participate was in Japanese.

Interviews began in the students' initial days at GFC and were held at three- or four-month intervals. The longitudinal perspective allowed the researcher to monitor each student's trajectory and identify key points that emerged over time using Charmaz's (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory, where analysis runs in tandem with data collection (Clarke, 2007; Seidman, 2006).

Interviews usually took 60-90 minutes. All were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author and sent to relevant participants for member checking. The transcripts were coded, and memos were written between collection rounds. Rather than using predetermined categories for data analysis, themes emerged from a careful reading of the data and were grounded in the participants' words. Early themes included contact with Japan, new friendships, impressions of GFC, and the environment beyond. Ensuing interviews took up these themes, exploring further developments, as well as continuing an open approach which allowed new themes to present themselves, including: GFC as a Japanese island in New Zealand, the officially-promoted separation of Japanese students from non-Japanese students, management's promotion of Japanese ideology and the special treatment of Japanese students. From Interview Three onward, interviews were individualized to track each participant's unique trajectory.

After the fourth interview round, the researcher drew up participant-specific posters graphically representing individual trajectories (see Figure 1) and reviewed the posters with each participant in their fifth interview, checking interpretations and digging deeper into selected areas.

**Figure 1**  
**Member Checking Poster**

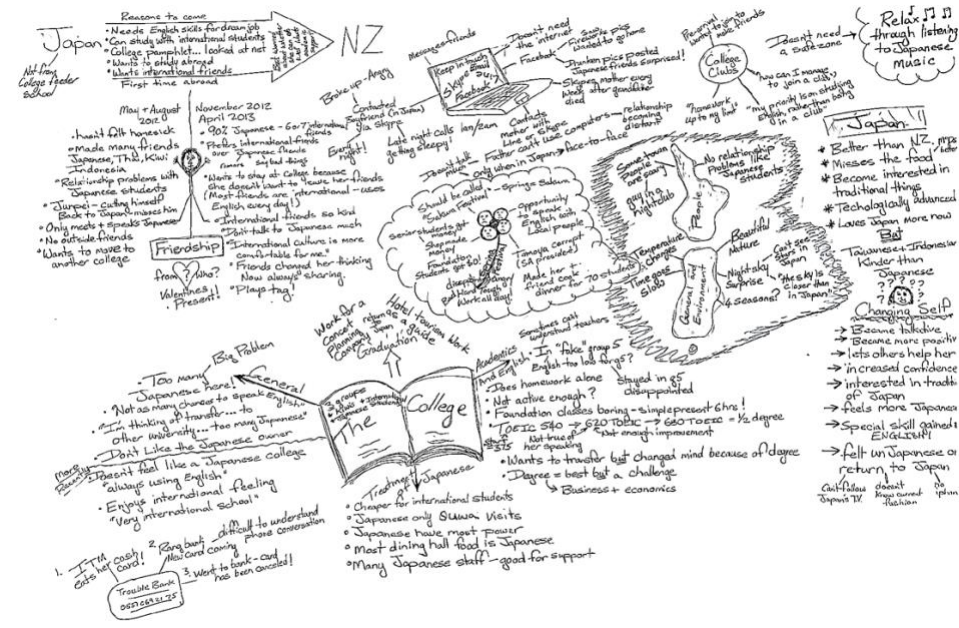


Table 1 shows the timing of the interviews, and the numbers attached to quotes below indicate which interview they came from. The interview times are significant because they can reveal the students' attitudes over time. All names are pseudonyms.

**Table 1**  
**Interviews Relative to the Arrival**

Interview	Date after arrival at GFC
1	1 month
2	4 months
3	7 months
4	12 months
5	16 months
6	20 months

**FINDINGS**

**Studying at GFC: A Japanese Enclave in New Zealand**

In most study abroad programs, students go into an institution that has emerged from the local community – meaning their educational experience will be different from what they would experience at home. However, although GFC's webpage stated that the student body included people from twenty-four different countries during the research period, a distinctive element was that GFC was so heavily influenced by concepts linked to Japanese culture that locals commonly referred to it as 'the Japanese College.' For

instance, it followed the Japanese university calendar, not the New Zealand one; there was a considerable amount of Japanese language media found in the library, including New Zealand's largest manga collection; and the dining hall menu was heavily Japanese.

The college also physically resembled Japan in numerous ways. The cherry blossom trees that lined the campus access road conjured up a vision of Japan and these trees, when in full bloom, served as the centerpiece of the college's annual festival. The campus was also known for its beautiful and meticulous gardens, reminiscent of manicured park grounds in Japan. The recreation center was called the *dojo*, another reminder of GFC's Japanese connection.

At the time of the study, management appeared to be promoting the human side of GFC's Japaneseness even more than the pervasive physical aspects. There were many Japanese teachers and administrators and numerous Western staff with Japanese connections and language abilities working at the college. The primary position of the Japanese students in the college was highlighted by the fact that the student support manager was monolingual in Japanese.

Living arrangements and study context furthered the Japaneseness of the experience. Japanese students were accommodated in two designated dormitories (male/female) on campus separated from those of other international students. Their initial months were spent in the English-language focused foundation program, where classes consisted almost exclusively of Japanese students. Proficiency for progressing to other programs was measured through the TOIEC test, administered compulsorily at regular intervals. Preparation classes were held exclusively for the Japanese students. On the other hand, after progressing to a degree, the participants were sometimes the only Japanese student in the class.

The Japanese focus of the college was evident from the early days of the student experience at a ceremonial level. At the college's 2014 commencement ceremony, only three cultures were explicitly acknowledged: New Zealand Māori, New Zealand European and Japanese. Speeches in Māori, English, and Japanese were made by special guests, GFC management, and students. Mrs. Suwa, GFC's owner's wife, closed the ceremony by paying special attention to the theme of a 'GFC family', and conjured up images of living and studying in an enclave-like environment separated from the world outside the college gates.

The pre-arrival questionnaire revealed some interesting points. Predictably, popular aspirations were to become international, make non-co-national friends, and be treated like an adult. However, many of the students who answered the questionnaire had talked to ex-GFC students in Japan and were aware of the Japanese focus. They, therefore, had an expectation of Japanese events and Japanese food at the college, and one even commented that Japanese could live comfortably at GFC without using English.

GFC was situated on the edge of a New Zealand provincial city and the Japanese students could leave the campus for short periods. However, most rarely did, and it was usually in the company of Japanese peers – resulting in little interaction with the outside community. So, while the Japanese students were technically in New Zealand, they were seemingly removed from its society, able to stay within a Japanese cultural bubble and operate in ways similar to their home experience. GFC acted, in a sense, as a Japanese institution, and awareness of this, along with a sense of frustration, emerged in participant interviews. For example, Harumi noted in her second interview that: “[GFC] was made for Japanese, so there are Japanese staff, Japanese food, a lot of Japanese students” (2). Kayo observed that the library provided evidence: “In the library we can find Japanese books. If this is not a Japanese school, finding Japanese books is a little bit difficult, but this school has lots of Japanese [books]” (3). According to one student, GFC was like a Japanese island in New Zealand:

I never thought that here is like international college. Global Family College, no! Japanese College of Education I think. Japanese island exactly I think. It's like small Japan, we shouldn't have an opportunity to speak Japanese in here! (Taka 3)

Shihoko noted that these isolationist, and perhaps essentialist, intentions were built into management communications:

Japanese are not international students...everything is divided into three groups, like Japanese, International students and Kiwis. We have a questionnaire during the semester

and it says, “Japanese, Kiwis or International”. If you are Japanese tick Japanese, or Kiwis or International. Cos GFC is doing that means it is official. (Shihoko 6)

This distinction entered the participants’ discourse, and they inevitably used ‘international students’ to refer to those who were neither New Zealanders nor Japanese.

Beyond management’s intentional influence on the environment, the sheer weight of numbers of Japanese relative to other groups on campus created a Japan-like social environment and this was a major factor in making some of the focal students feel as if they had not left home. This was dramatically highlighted by Hiro, who claimed in Interview Five that the “mother-tongue” of GFC was Japanese.

In early interviews, there was occasional resistance from students who felt that it devalued the study abroad experience, as can be read into Taka’s comment above about talking Japanese on campus. Shihoko, too, in her first interview, questioned her wisdom of choosing GFC because she could get the same level of internationalism in Japan:

Oh, many Japanese people!... it’s not a good thing. In Japan also have foreigner, so like Kansai foreign language college looks the same with Japanese people and other country’s people. If I go to in Japan college it’s the same, so I was disappointed. (Shihoko 1)

The sections below will expand on how aspects of Japaneseness played out for this cohort.

### **Japanese Food**

Food was a vital element of the experience. The campus dining hall with its Japanese-influenced menu promoted the illusion of being in Japan:

Dining hall food is, I think, for Japanese. Breakfast, we can eat rice and miso soup and at lunch we always can eat noodles, udon or soba. (Yui 3)

Displaying a strong sense of frustration, Taka made a direct connection between the menu and his ability to become international:

We should reject the Japanese culture if someone wanna study English. We don’t need to have rice every day because international people doesn’t have rice every day... the food is like Japanese style, it’s not international... here is not international. (Taka 3)

Interestingly, the Japanese-themed menu in the GFC dining hall faced material-level issues: there was a discrepancy between the intention and the execution. From the second round of interviews, participants frequently described the food as ‘tasteless’ and ‘disgusting,’ and it certainly did not fit their interpretation of Japanese food.

In spite of Taka’s resistance above, students took their own measures to maintain a (better quality) Japanese menu. They brought back ingredients from Japan after holidays and family members posted Japanese food items to mix with food smuggled out of the dining hall to cook in the dormitories.

My mother sent me some ingredients, like soup or easy to cook main dish. I cook nikujaga and fried rice and stir fried, Japanese food. I wanna eat Japanese food because I think it’s good for my health. (Shihoko 2)

Cooking Japanese food in the dormitories extended beyond taste and health-consciousness, however, it was about sharing traditional time together, echoing Hafeeza and Pazil’s (2019) finding that such activities provide study abroad students with a sense of family and comfort.

### **Conational Connections**

It was not just that the Japanese students shared classes or even lunch with each other, they actually had no choice but to live together. The only non-Japanese students accommodated in the participants’ dormitories were a handful of local students, perhaps hoping that they might provide the Japanese students with English practice without watering down their Japaneseness. Kami explained the accommodation arrangements (note her use of the term ‘international students’ to exclude the Japanese students):

Most of international student is living in Hall Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten. The opposite side, across the road and most of Japanese people are living in this side. We don’t have connection with other nationalities. (Kami 6)

In this living environment students perceived English as non-essential:

Lots of Japanese student live in hall, so if we don’t try to speak English we can live without English. So, feels like Japan. (Ken 3)



The physical closeness to other Japanese students also meant that development of co-national relationships was unavoidable, and according to Hiro a “Japanese society” (5) formed in the dormitory. The extent to which GFC management pursued their ethnically-oriented accommodation policies was clear when Riki’s request to live in a shared dormitory room to save money was refused: only ‘international students’ were accommodated in shared rooms, so Riki was effectively asking to share a room with a non-Japanese student. Betraying a tendency to stereotype, GFC’s accommodation manager told Riki that Japanese students desired cleanliness and privacy more than other nationalities and thus could only live in individual rooms (4). Yuka, who atypically had made some Thai friends, wanted to shift to their dormitory building because “if I move to Hall Ten I can stay with the people who come from another country, so I use English the whole day” (Yuka 6). However, management again turned down the request, thus stifling conditions that would have supported a situation generally assumed to be an essential part of studying abroad.

Yoichi and Shihoko both talked of their desire to live off campus but knew that was unacceptable to management. Yoichi stated about living in town:

I think there's more opportunities to touching Kiwi cultures, which is really casual. Maybe I can find them in daily life, but in GFC I have to try to touch in the culture. (Yoichi 1)

Without a concerted effort by the Japanese students at GFC, experiencing ‘true’ New Zealand might not occur.

### **College Clubs**

Another element of GFC supported by management was the existence of clubs which reflected Japanese culture, such as *taiko* (Japanese drums), which had been going for over 25 years and had even performed at an international *taiko* gathering. Japanese students dominated these GFC clubs and their culture permeated. Yoichi, for example, described *taiko* as: “Very Japanese! Strict training and practicing and some customs are really Japanese” (6).

### **Safe Zones**

As other literature has touched upon (e.g., Gebhard, 2012) regarding study abroad students, many of the students in this study seemed to promote their isolation by decorating their dormitory rooms in overt displays of Japanese culture. Harumi, for instance, tried to recreate a home environment by hanging Japanese posters on her dormitory walls, stocking her shelves with books from Japan, and playing Japanese music (1). These environments, which we have termed ‘safe zones,’ developed through the Japanese students’ agency and promoted the Japanese enclave feeling. Safe zones were environments where speaking Japanese was a central element, and participants could escape from relationship stress, homesickness, loneliness, and English language stress when feeling overloaded. However, the perceived need for a safe zone never vanished entirely. Shihoko, for instance, spoke of it in Interview Five:

I use English all the time, read, write, read, write, then I feel I have to speak Japanese. So, speak Japanese, Japanese friends and I escape. Kami in her room and we talked about Japanese food or Japanese things. (Shihoko 5)

### **Shifting Towards Acceptance**

One of the main advantages of longitudinal studies is that situational or environmental evolutions can be recognized as they occur. This was the case here. In the initial interviews, many participants complained about the Japaneseness of GFC and discounted the support it provided. Some questioned the college’s international claim, and perceived management’s policies that promoted the overt Japaneseness as restricting their opportunities to speak English, become more global, and get a true sense of being abroad. Harumi stated, “if I don’t use English outside of class, I can live here” (2). Yuka felt that GFC was “like I am in Japanese college and then the student who come from another country came to our university” (5). Yuka’s Thai friendships had resulted from a concentrated effort to negate this feeling, and for her initial 18 months at GFC, this was her predominant circle of friends. However, as time progressed, the cohort’s trajectory moved towards accepting GFC’s Japan-like environment.

In fact, for most students, their own choice of social networks (supported by the prevailing conditions as indicated above) worked to maintain or promote Japaneseness. Some students in later interviews asserted that initial complaints about GFC’s Japaneseness were based on imagined selves who

could embrace the assumed conditions of study abroad, but hindsight allowed a re-assessment. A quote from Riki, for example, appeared to advocate the status quo:

The foreigners, person who speak English, maybe if I talked with they guys and played with they guys it's improve second language, but Japanese and Japanese relationship is really good for make a adult personality. Some Japanese say, "Japanese is really bad" or "Japan is shit" and they don't like Japan. Maybe I think they guys too much thinking about improve English and forget about improve own self. If some student go to America or something, and almost student is only American, the student gonna be like don't like Japan, become like Americans. It's really important to remember the Japanese spirit. I think many Japanese is really important for us Japanese student. (Riki 2)

Riki here identified outcomes of study abroad beyond language learning and intercultural communicative competence, ones that he had learned to value and which would allow him to slip readily back into Japanese society as a mature adult. They seemed to embody the role that GFC's owner, Mr. Suwa, wanted the college to play in the lives of the Japanese students: A safe place from which to view elements of a foreign environment with minimal effect on their cultural identity.

Towards the end of the research, even Yuka, who had worked so hard at becoming international, began embracing the Japan-like environment. In Interview Five, she hinted that her membership in her Thai-dominated friendship circle was ending because she began feeling uncomfortable surrounded by non-Japanese students:

I think for me sometimes I feel tired of hearing Thai language because their personality is of course different to me. Sometimes feel so hard to stay with them whole day. So, I think others as well maybe it is difficult to stay with foreign students. So, they prefer to stay with same nationality. (Yuka 5)

Her comment suggests that language and culture were essential factors in feeling comfortable while studying abroad. Yuka transitioned back to her co-national group and made no further effort to extend her contact with elements beyond the Japanese enclave of GFC during the remaining research period.

Other research participants indicated an increasing sense of what being Japanese meant through their comments on other elements of life at GFC. In Interview Five, Ai described a misunderstanding between Japanese and New Zealand students in a dance group that she was a member of that stemmed from different ideologies towards clubs:

They said that the practice was too strict or hard. Momo-chan always say when we are dancing we need...sensitivity. Some Kiwi students couldn't understand it and "with the same choreography why do we need to sensitivity?". And we discussed for some time and then they left. (Ai 5)

Through describing the behaviour of local students in her dormitory, Shihoko showed what can happen when two groups are brought together in regard to personal responsibility and respect for others. 'They' here refers to the small number of local New Zealand students who shared the dormitory:

I found heaps of bins of beer or alcohol in the common room, but I don't know who did it so I had to clean up all cos cleaners don't take those bins....They think loud music is fine, "why I can't hear music? Why can't I listen to music?". They think music is alright, they think "why you complain about music?". (Shihoko 6)

The conditions which at the outset had seemed to curtail promised opportunities of life in New Zealand were being re-interpreted as protective of a shared Japanese ideology.

## DISCUSSION

### GFC's Dejima: An Affordance or Limitation?

GFC's attempt to replicate a Japanese environment brings to mind an episode in Japan's history where the *Tokugawa shogunate* closed Japan to the world to prevent outside ideologies influencing the Japanese people and threatening the *shogun's* national hegemony. During this time, the Dutch were the only Europeans permitted contact with Japan, and they were provided with a small artificial island called

*Dejima*, situated in Nagasaki Harbor, to live in and trade with Japanese people. This enclave was linked to the Japanese mainland by a narrow footbridge, which meant that although the Dutch merchants were technically in Japan, they were forever outside looking in. From a Japanese perspective, although contact with the Dutch was very limited, the Dutch presence in *Dejima* also provided a small window to catch a glimpse of the world beyond, albeit without allowing integration.

In many ways, *Dejima* is an excellent metaphor for GFC. In the case of the original *Dejima*, Japan was the wide background, and the Japanese were observing the island enclave and gaining bits and pieces of knowledge from the Dutch visitors. We can see GFC as a mirror image, representative of the overarching Japanese culture peeking out at the Other. And GFC's Japanese students also received bits and pieces of knowledge from the Other, but the powers-that-be consciously limited their ability to gain greater insights.

Analysis of the pre-arrival questionnaire, with which the study had begun, indicated that this was not what GFC's students had in mind, but it was the extent of interaction with New Zealand that GFC's management facilitated. It is evident that they considered the Japanese student body as a special group to be kept separate from other nationalities at the college, categorizing them differently in official communications and isolating them physically in accommodation, not simply for the settling-in period, but for their entire period at the college.

GFC's *Dejima*-like policies presented numerous limitations to intercultural contact for the students, such as inhibiting opportunities to interact with others in English. It thus greatly reduced their ability to make non-Japanese friends, adopt an international attitude and become proficient in using English. It also limited the independence they were able to enjoy in New Zealand, and likely impeded some aspects of personal growth, such as independent living arrangements. It probably also negatively impacted off-campus opportunities because they had no local friends to guide them.

Given that many of these measures seem in direct contravention of the conditions supposed to optimize the results of study abroad (Cammish, 1997; Coleman, 2015), it is important to consider the motivation for constructing the context in this way. In doing so, we are mindful of research indicating the intense struggle often associated with study abroad (Gündüz & Alakbarov, 2019; Nilsson, 2019; Mikal et al., 2013), which may have influenced GFC. Mr. Suwa openly stated in a GFC staff meeting that while he welcomed non-Japanese students, the college was built for Japanese, and his priority was allowing Japanese to study abroad while protecting them from the trauma of doing so. He may have believed that the comfortable nature of the Japan-like environment was particularly attuned to the needs of this group because, by their own admission, many of them were lower academic, socially struggling young adults in search of direction. By reducing the lifestyle changes, he perhaps intended to leave students free to study in English classes and build their confidence. Rai (2020) asserts that student safety is "the most fundamental priority" facing study abroad providers (p. 10). Sin and Tavares (2019) identify that providers must address the combined forces of coping with the stress of study abroad while concentrating on a study "to ensure their global attractiveness" (p. 59).

On the other hand, the process of coping with new experiences and eventually finding them interesting, mind-opening and challenging, rather than overwhelming, is part of the trajectory towards intercultural learning and the excitement that potentially rewards the study abroad experience. It is important to consider whether a too comfortable context with diminished international aspects based on essentialist notions of the nature and needs of Japanese students removed the potential for personal growth. The words of the students interviewed here suggest that they were nevertheless able to identify important areas of personal growth from the experience.

One of the most important things that they gained from what contact they had with non-Japanese people at GFC was self-realization about who they were and where they came from. In GFC's *Dejima*-like environment, many participants appeared to embrace their culture, as indicated by the pride in the Japanese culturally based clubs, such as *taiko*. Others have noted the importance of *taiko* in study abroad "as an emblem – and performance – of Japanese identity" (Creighton, 2008, p. 61) and as a response to "cultural nostalgia" (Johnson, 2011, p. 330). The college's annual festival also brought the Japanese culture sharply into focus for many students. During the festival many of the participants took on cliché cultural roles, wearing *kimonos*, playing Japanese music and doing Japanese cultural dances.

However protective the context, a significant element of this period was, of course, the physical distance from family, friends and their immediate environment. Although the effects were mitigated by the tools of technology allowing for frequent contact (Rapley, 2019), as well as the Japaneseness of GFC, many of them were living independently of their families for the first time, and this contributed to a sense of greater maturity. It was perhaps this sense of personal growth that led them to a growing acceptance of their situation at GFC in spite of its curtailment of many of the promises of study abroad which initially some of them aspired to.

### **Embracing Dejima**

Indeed, although there were moments of protest, as a group, these participants seem never to have been truly at odds with GFC's *Dejima*-like environment. It made life easier and the students increasingly accepted the comforting elements it afforded.

The pre-arrival questionnaire revelation that many students expected GFC to provide Japanese food and organize Japanese events indicates that living in a truly foreign environment was not necessarily important to them, although comments indicating a desire to have "a strong mind", "to flourish in the world", "to become independent", and "to create a new piece of myself" indicated that some were motivated by opportunities to mature and experience something new. Other expectations, like "even if I can't speak English I can be comfortable" and "there is Japanese support", point to the importance of GFC's 'life raft' that protected the students from outside influences while still allowing them to enjoy some new experiences. Since the college was known to be Japanese-owned and operated, they may have expected that while they would be physically situated in New Zealand, the lifestyle change from Japan could be limited. Therefore, we might suppose that rather than making a bold move in studying abroad, those who chose to attend GFC sought something between an adventure and a safe pathway.

Many students reinforced or even propagated the image of *Dejima* at the college through safe zones resembling Japanese environments and cooking traditional food together, a central dimension to culture and ethnic identity (Brown et al., 2010; Fonseca, 2008). Yuka provides a strong indication of a diminishing resistance. It appears that she never achieved ease in the company of her Thai friends and decided to return to the Japanese group and accept the *Dejima*-like enclave. It is fair to say that by the end of the study none of the students were demonstrating a growing acceptance, interest or willingness to increase connections with 'the Other' beyond surface level, which is one of the fervent hopes of study abroad. This would suggest that the personal gains that they undoubtedly made could not fully compensate for opportunities lost of a wider experience of the world outside Japan.

## **CONCLUSION**

From analysing GFC's physical and social design, and their own explanatory statements, it is evident that the founders made conscious efforts to establish a metaphorical *Dejima* to allow Japanese students to step from one Japan to another. Any initial resistance from the participants appeared to dissipate over the course of the study, and they were, in fact, to some degree complicit throughout in their adoption of Japanese lifestyle elements and friendship circles.

GFC certainly could have provided more opportunities to make international connections, but it chose instead to offer students a safe environment and a steady road to travel, enabling them to achieve some of the affordances of study abroad that Coleman (2015) identified, such as greater confidence, while others such as intercultural openness were limited. It was an experience that allowed these students to dip their toes in an ocean in which they could see glimpses of life beyond, but always with the life raft of Japanese support to rescue them if they ventured too far. As Ballo, et al. (2019) point out, international students are not all the same and have "specific needs and require targeted services" (p. 18). The management decisions at GFC can be seen in this light. A *Dejima*-like environment was not necessarily what the students initially expected, and it may have removed other opportunities for greater growth, but the metaphorical *Dejima* of GFC might be seen as an affordance for the safe adventure and the opportunities for assuming maturity that seem to have been important motivations for these particular students.

As indicated above, Ogden (2007) has also identified an impulse among institutions to replicate aspects of home environments, drawing an analogy between colonialism and study abroad. While

acknowledging the limitation imposed by its small number of participants, what this article offers, through its extended time in the field and repeated interviews with the cohort, is a close investigation of how this can operate in a specific situation and how its impact may be felt and described by those involved. It can therefore help enrich the understanding of the diversity encompassed by study abroad, given the transgression of some of the assumed fundamental premises of that notion alongside these students' acknowledgment of the opportunities their time in New Zealand gave them for developing maturity and for understanding themselves as Japanese.

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