

Obstacles to Studying Abroad: The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Policies and Apprehension about English Abilities

Scott Menking

The Japanese government, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), has emphasized the importance of “public diplomacy—direct appeals to citizens and public opinion” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA], 2009b, para. 1) so that overseas, the general public as well as policymakers will have positive images and a better understanding of Japan; as a result, a variety of activities in other countries have been funded and supported. For example, MOFA, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (MITI), and the Japan Tourism Agency participate in overseas Expos (e.g., MOFA, June 11, 2009); the Agency for Cultural Affairs organizes Japanese Film Festivals in Asian countries (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2009). A Japan Creative Centre was recently opened in Singapore to disseminate information about Japan and Japanese Culture (Japan Creative Centre, n.d.). Japan continues to work with UNESCO to fund “human resources development and capacity-building projects” around the world (MOFA, March 2009).

In addition to these extraordinary efforts, the Japanese government is emphasizing exchanges that bring foreigners to Japan, believing that doing so will “promote friendship and goodwill with other countries” (MOFA, 2009b). The government also asserts that Japanese society benefits from the exchanges because its higher education is internationalized and Japanese businesses are revitalized. These exchanges include the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, which has sponsored over 52,000 people from 51 countries since its inception in 1987 (JET Programme, October 2009), and the Global Youth Exchange (GYE) Program, which each year selects between 18 (MOFA, 2009e) and 54 participants (MOFA, 2009a) from as many as 41 countries (MOFA, 2009d) for a 10-day

(MOFA, 2009e) to 14-day (MOFA, 2009f) program. The Japanese government is also funding the Japan - East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) Programme, which was first announced in 2007 and was designed to bring 6,000 young people to Japan each year for the following five years (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d.; MOFA, September 11, 2007).

In addition to these people-to-people exchanges, the Japanese government is financing intellectual exchange, including the exchange of undergraduate and graduate students at universities. For example, through the JENESYS Programme, various programs, such as the science and engineering training program that allowed 23 undergraduate and graduate students to come to Japan (MOFA, August 1, 2008), have been implemented. Since 1954, Japanese Government (Monbukagakusho) Scholarships have made it possible for 72,000 students from 160 countries and regions to study in Japan (MOFA, n.d. a). Equally important, in 1983, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) created a “Plan to Accept 100,000 Foreign Students” to study in Japan. In May 2004 the number of foreign students reached what was, at the time, a record high of 117,000 students (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], n.d. d). Building on this success, in July 2008, Japan announced the lofty “Plan to Accept 300,000 International Students” (MOFA, 2009c), and in 2009, MEXT selected 13 “core” universities to “dramatically boost” the number of international students (MEXT, n.d. c). In order to realize the goal, the action plan includes funding of 200 to 400 million yen per year per university for five years (MEXT, n.d. c).

System for Receiving Foreign Students

Foreign students who want to study on short-term programs must do so at Japanese universities with which their universities have exchange agreements (MOFA, n.d. a). Similarly, many long-term (e.g., year-long) programs are conducted through inter-university exchange agreements. Students who have been awarded the Japanese Government (Monbukagakusho) Scholarship (e.g., research students and undergraduate students) are the exception and are placed by MEXT

(e.g., MOFA, n.d. b; MOFA, n.d. c; MOFA, n.d. d), thus nullifying the exchange agreement requirement.

Inbound Exchanges at Shimane University

Because of the creation and support of national projects, it is not surprising that Shimane University has witnessed an increase in international exchange. Since the first inter-university agreement with an American university in 1982, an additional 33 agreements with institutions in ten countries have been established (Shimane University, Center for International Exchanges, n.d. a). As of October 1, 2008, 200 international students were enrolled at the university (Shimane University, n.d.). Short-term programs, such as the twelve-day program in May 2009 when seven Americans studied at the university, and visits from foreign students, including the sixteen Korean students in July, the seven Chinese students in August, and the four Chinese students in September 2009 (Shimane University, Center for International Exchanges, n.d. b), have all increased the international visibility of the university. In addition, unofficial programs organized by Faculties or individual faculty members, such as the program that brings graduate science students from Texas, have brought additional valuable real-world components and an international flair to the tertiary educational experience of the Shimane University students who interacted with these foreign sojourners.

Of the 200 international students at Shimane University, 88 were undergraduates, equivalent to 1.62 percent of the undergraduate population (Shimane University, n.d.). When one considers Hiroshima University, with 10,978 undergraduates but only 71 undergraduate international students (.65 percent) (Hiroshima University, n.d. a; Hiroshima University, n.d. b) and Osaka University, which has been chosen as one of the 13 core universities for the promotion of internationalization, with its 15,937 undergraduates (Osaka University, 2009b, p. 23) and 245 undergraduate international students (1.53 percent) (Osaka University, 2009a), it may be easy, although not necessarily accurate, to conclude that Shimane University has sufficient international exchange programs at the undergraduate level.

Benefits to the Student Body and University

An active foreign student population in Japan's universities positively affects students' tertiary educational experiences, heightens the cultural awareness of faculty and staff, is a rewarding experience for those involved, and accentuates the university's image. When foreign and Japanese students take courses together, they can interact and explore language learning from new perspectives (Freed, 1995). Moreover, in the past when foreign students were in the author's classes, the Japanese students gained new perspectives on how foreigners view them, allowing the Japanese students to obtain valuable, real-world cross-cultural understanding. These benefits also extend to the faculty and staff members who are involved with the international students. Ryan (2009) discussed an exchange program between St. Thomas University and a university in the Philippines. Every year, six to eight Filipino students come to Japan for a ten-day program, during which 50 to 70 Japanese students interact with them. This program affords the Japanese students the opportunity to learn about other countries, cultures, habits, and customs, and the experience is equally valuable to the professors and office staff who gain cultural insight (Ryan, 2009). More impressively, Ryan asserted that the establishment and continuation of the program is the "single most worthwhile experience I've been involved with in my career." These examples demonstrate some of the merits to the students, staff, and faculty, but in addition to these human and intellectual benefits, a large foreign student body increases the university's "profile in the international arena of academic university cultures" (Gilmour, 2007, p. 32). This is essential if the university is going to remain competitive in an era where college enrollments are rapidly decreasing (McNeill, 2008). For these reasons, continued increases in the foreign student population at Shimane University should be welcomed. However, study abroad, by definition, includes both the sending and receiving of students.

Imbalance

All of Japan's programs and plans are impressive and demonstrate Japan's extensive financial and administrative commitment to receiving foreign students in Japan, but as the following illustrations demonstrate, the national programs and

plans seem to lack equally aggressive endeavors to send Japanese students abroad. To begin with, although the outline for the JENESYS Programme includes the dispatching of Japanese youth, the author could find no concrete information suggesting financial and administrative resources had been used for this purpose. Second, although MEXT discusses projects such as the UNESCO Youth Study Tour for sending Japanese students to UNESCO member nations (MEXT, n.d. b), there is little information demonstrating the achievement of such programs. Third, when MEXT provided funding for universities to increase the number of incoming students to 300,000, it also affirmed their plan to continue to provide scholarships for Japanese students to study abroad (MEXT, n.d. e), but the number of foreign students far exceeds the number of Japanese students. For example, while one MEXT Web site (MEXT, n.d. a) sets a target of 3,947 Japanese students, which equates to approximately 1.15 percent as many scholarships for sending students as for receiving, one of the scholarships, the Long-term International Exchange Scholarship, was awarded to just 57 students in the 2009-2010 school year (Japan Student Service Organization [JASSO], n.d.). In addition, the Japan Student Services Organization warns students to think carefully about their financial situation and lifestyle before applying for these scholarships (JASSO, 2004a) because most are actually loans that Japanese students must start to repay six months after graduation (JASSO, 2004b).

The final result of such an imbalance is that in contrast to the approximately 95,000 foreign students who were studying in Japan in 2002, 79,000 Japanese students were studying in 33 countries (MEXT, n.d. c). The significance of these statistics can be better understood by studying *The Global Education Digest 2008*, a publication by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Institute for Statistics (2008, p. 121). The outbound mobility ratio (i.e., the percentage of the total tertiary enrollment that is studying abroad) for Hong Kong is 21.3 percent. South Korea sends 3.0 percent of its tertiary population to institutions outside of the country, and 2.0 percent of China's tertiary population studies overseas. However, just 1.4 percent of the Japanese tertiary enrollment studies abroad. *The Digest* also provides the net flow of

students (i.e., the result by subtracting the number of outbound students from the number of inbound students and expressing the difference as a percentage of the total number of tertiary enrollments) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2008, p. 290). While a positive ratio indicates more incoming than outgoing students, a negative ratio shows that a country sends more students than it receives. With ratios of -1.6 and -2.5 percent, respectively, China and South Korea are net dispatchers of students, but the positive ratio of 1.7 percent for Japan indicates it receives more students than it sends.

This positive ratio is mirrored in the net flow of exchange students at Shimane University. As the number of inter-university agreements and international students on campus increased, there was not a proportional expansion in sending Japanese students abroad. On October 1, 2008, Shimane University had five students, equivalent to .09 percent of the undergraduate population, in two countries studying on year-long programs (Shimane University, n.d.). Similarly, although 34 foreign students visited Shimane University on official programs during 2009, participation in the university-wide short-term programs was lackluster, with .35 percent of the undergraduate body participating in one of three programs: Canada (three students on the joint program with Tottori University [Shimane University, Center for International Exchanges, n.d. b]), Korea (five students), and Arkansas in the United States (11 students). This is not to say, however, that these are the only students who traveled overseas. For example, faculty members conducted independent tours (e.g., the London Tour, which regularly has 20 students); the Faculty of Law and Literature unofficially started a study abroad program in the United States; and students independently researched and participated in programs in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries. One can postulate that more unofficial programs, such as the two-week program to Michigan by a Faculty of Education professor in February 2010, will be developed.

Impetus for Study

With an undergraduate student body of 5,447 students (Shimane University, n.d.), it is possible for all of these exchange programs, and others, to run

concurrently and meet the varying needs of students in different Faculties. In fact, a July 2009 article in *The Japan Times* reinforced the importance of additional overseas study opportunities for Japanese students when it noted that not only foreign language skills but also experience living abroad, flexibility, and the ability to adapt to different cultures (Slodkowski, July 8, 2009) are necessary in the current job market. However, before additional programs are started, it is necessary to understand some of the factors that students consider when deciding whether to participate in a study abroad program. As a result, the following study was designed to explore possible obstacles limiting participation in study abroad programs.

Methodology and Subjects

A questionnaire was administered to 180 first-year students (79 male, 101 female). The questionnaire was written in English with enough Japanese translation to ensure students understood the meaning of each item. While 31 students (17.22 percent) who completed the questionnaire are studying in the Faculty of Life and Environmental Science and 32 (17.78 percent) are in the Faculty of Education, 33 (18.33 percent) belong to the Interdisciplinary Faculty of Science and Engineering and 84 (46.67 percent) are in the Faculty of Law and Literature. All of the students were in the advanced level of the mandatory English classes.

Results

Five factors that may influence participation in a study abroad program were investigated. The first, lack of interest in other countries, was given as a reason for not going on a study abroad program by 9.44 percent of the students. Of these students, just over half gave only this reason. For these nine students, other interests take priority, and while educators may try to help them find the joy in other cultures, lack of interest is a reasonable reason to decide not to participate.

The second factor is the necessity of receiving university credit for taking part in the study abroad program. Overall, 19.44 percent of the students attached this

condition to participation, but only one of these students cited it as the only factor influencing his decision not to participate in a study abroad program. Although there is a tendency to believe that students reject programs that do not bear credit, this study does not find overwhelming evidence to support this supposition. Instead, these findings indicate that credit is one of many factors that students consider, and taken together with those factors, may contribute to non-participation.

A third factor, lack of time, was given by approximately one-third of the informants. Like the second factor, only one student felt this was the lone reason why he would not participate in a study abroad program. The remaining students most often combined it with financial constraints (75.00 percent of the students who felt time was an issue) and deficiency in English skills (60.71 percent).

The results of the questionnaire indicate that two factors—insufficient financial resources (61.67 percent) and concerns about English ability (63.89 percent)—may contribute more directly to the decision not to go on a study abroad program. In the weeks preceding the administration of the questionnaire, students had been made aware of the Arkansas study abroad program and its cost of 400,000 yen, and this may have contributed to students' perception that such an endeavor is beyond their financial reach.

Discussion

The decision to study abroad is a complex one with multiple factors. The results of this study indicate that while lack of interest in foreign countries and getting credit for participation are not impediments, finances and perceived English ability restrict students' exuberance for studying abroad. By actively addressing these two perceived obstacles, future participation may be positively affected.

Financial Restrictions

Every effort must be made to keep programs as affordable as possible.

American universities are trying innovative approaches to study abroad, including embedding a short-term overseas study program in a regular course (Hulstrand, 2006). This may prove beneficial at Shimane University since these programs would be shorter and therefore less expensive.

Lack of Confidence

Students' lack of confidence in their English abilities is an issue with which the university has some control. To begin with, mandatory English courses at the university must be conduits through which students become more interested and confident in their English. Furthermore, students must be assured that the pre-program English classes, which are currently available for both the Arkansas and Florida programs, will adequately prepare them for their time abroad. Although these are not novel ideas, they bear repeating, particularly since previous study abroad research has examined students' confidence during the program (e.g., Atkins, 2008), changes in English language abilities (e.g., Menking, 2004; Menking 2006), and the effect of pre-departure programs on adaptation (e.g., Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Long & Tabuki, 2002). In contrast to these studies, the current research suggests that confidence issues must be addressed even before students decide to participate (e.g., during mandatory English courses), and that by doing so, it may be possible to get more students to participate in the study abroad programs.

Conclusion

The Japanese government has dedicated vast resources to promoting internationalization, but these efforts have tended to focus on the receiving of students without providing adequate opportunities for Japanese students to go abroad. The current study found that financial resources and misgivings about English abilities may be contributing to the lower participation rates by Japanese tertiary students. MEXT could assist students in overcoming the first obstacle, but responsibility for the second remains with educators. As a result, English courses must continue to inspire students and provide them with the impetus to forego

their negative attitudes and embrace English. Doing so, they may gain the confidence to undertake study abroad.

References

- Agency for Cultural Affairs. (2009). *Administration of cultural affairs in Japan - Fiscal 2009; Chapter IX: Dissemination of Japanese culture and measure for international cooperation through international cultural exchange*. Retrieved from http://www.bunka.go.jp/english/pdf/chapter_09.pdf
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). (n.d.) *Japan - East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths Programme 2009 - 2011*. Retrieved from <http://www.aseansec.org/AroundASEAN-Jenesys.pdf>
- Atkins, A. (2008). Study abroad SIG: A focus point for study abroad related research. In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, and M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.
- Freed, B. (1995). Language learning and study abroad. In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 3-33). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Gilmour, E. (2007). *The study abroad experience: Critical issues and the case for developing an ethnographic paradigm in cultural studies*. Miyagi Gakuin Girls University Research Journal, 105, 1-65.
- Hiroshima University. (n.d. a). 外国人留学生数 (2009年) [*The number of international exchange students (2009)*]. Retrieved from http://www.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/top/intro/gaiyou/ryugakuseisu/p_npmiew.html
- Hiroshima University. (n.d. b) 大学の概要 [Summary of the university]. Retrieved from <http://www.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/top/intro/gaiyou/index.html>
- Hulstrand, J. (2006). Education abroad on the fast track. *International Educator*, 15(3), 46-55.
- Japan Creative Centre. (n.d.). *About JCC*. Retrieved December 16, 2009, from http://www.sg.emb-japan.go.jp/JCC/about_jcc.html
- Japan Student Service Organization (JASSO). (2004a). 奨学金の申込みにあたって (留意点) [*Applying for scholarships: Important points*]. Retrieved from <http://www.jasso.go.jp/saiyou/abc.html>

- Japan Student Service Organization (JASSO). (2004b). *Scholarship loan programs for Japanese students*. Retrieved from http://www.jasso.go.jp/shougakukin/index_e.html
- Japan Student Service Organization (JASSO). (n.d.). **平成22年度留学生交流支援制度（長期派遣）募集要項** [*The system of and application procedures for the 2010 (long-term) study abroad support and scholarships*]. Retrieved from http://www.jasso.go.jp/scholarship/documents/h22chouki_h_youkou.pdf
- JET Programme. (2009, October). *About the JET Programme*. Retrieved from http://www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/visit/jet/outline.html
- Long, R., & Tabuki, M. (2002). KIT's student exchange orientation program. *Kyushu Institute of Technology Research Journal*, 50, 45-62.
- McNeill, D. (2008). *Facing enrollment crisis, Japanese universities fight to attract students*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 54(44), A17.
- Menking, S. (2004). Enhanced English speaking skills: A short-term study abroad. *Studies in Language and Culture: Memoirs of the Faculty of Law and Literature*, 16, 49-64.
- Menking, S. (2006). Intensive English Programs: Linguistic achievement. *Studies in Language and Culture: Memoirs of the Faculty of Law and Literature*, 21, 41-57.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (n.d. a). **奨学金事業の充実** [*Completing the scholarship process*]. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/shougakukin/main.htm
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (n.d. b). *Dissemination of UNESCO's Activities to the Younger Generations*. Retrieved from <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/unesco/007/002.htm>
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (n.d. c). *Launching the project for establishing core universities for internationalization (Global 30)*. Retrieved from <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/1283454.htm>
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (n.d. d). *Promotion of international student exchanges*. Retrieved from <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/struct/046.htm>
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (n.d. e).

- 日本人の海外留学 [*Study abroad for Japanese students*]. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo4/houkoku/attach/1249709.htm
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009, June 11). *Cooperative project between three government agencies at “Japan Expo” in Paris, One of the largest Japanese pop culture events in the world*. Retrieved from http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/event/2009/6/1193058_1160.html
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2008, August 1). *Implementation of university training programme for “Japan - East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) Programme.”* Retrieved from http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/event/2008/8/1182454_940.html
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2007, September 11). *Press conference, 11 September 2007*. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/2007/9/0911.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009a). *The 1995 Global Youth Exchange (GYE) Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/people/youth/gye/gye1995.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009b). *Public diplomacy/Culture*. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009c). *Student exchange programme*. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/people/student/index.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009d). *2000 Global Youth Exchange (GYE) Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/people/youth/gye/gye2000.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009e). *2009 Global Youth Exchange (GYE) Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/people/youth/gye/sympo2009.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009f). *2007 Global Youth Exchange (GYE) Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/people/youth/gye/sympo2007.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2009, March). *The UNESCO Japanese Funds-in-Trust for the Capacity Building of Human Resources*.

- Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/coop/unesco/program/fund.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (n.d. a). *Study in Japan, Comprehensive guide. Categories of student exchange in Japan: About short-term study and student exchange programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.studyjapan.go.jp/en/toj/toj0305e.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (n.d. b). *Study in Japan, Comprehensive Guide. Japanese Government (Monbukagakusho: MEXT) Scholarship for 2010 (College of Technology Students)*. Retrieved from http://www.studyjapan.go.jp/en/toj/pdf/kosen_e.pdf
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (n.d. c). *Study in Japan, Comprehensive Guide. Japanese Government (Monbukagakusho: MEXT) Scholarship for 2010 (Research Students)*. Retrieved from http://www.studyjapan.go.jp/en/toj/pdf/kenkyu_e.pdf
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (n.d. d). *Study in Japan, Comprehensive Guide. Japanese Government (Monbukagakusho: MEXT) Scholarship for 2010 (Undergraduate Students)*. Retrieved from http://www.studyjapan.go.jp/en/toj/pdf/gakubu_e.pdf
- Osaka University. 2009a. *Introduction to Osaka University, International student numbers*. Retrieved from <http://www.osaka-u.ac.jp/en/guide/about/data/international.html>
- Osaka University. 2009b. *Osaka University Profile 2009*. Osaka: Production by Ikkou Tanaka. Retrieved from <http://www.osaka-u.ac.jp/en/guide/about/files/profile2009.pdf>
- Ryan, S. (2009, November). *Critical incidents from culture experience programmes*. Paper presented at the 35th Annual JALT International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning and Educational Materials Exhibition.
- Schmidt-Rinehart, B. & Knight, S. (2004). The homestay component of study abroad: Three perspectives. *Foreign Language Annals*, 37, 254-262.
- Shimane University. (n.d.). *Welcome to Shimane University: Shimane University Prospectus 2008-2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.shimane-u.ac.jp/en/images/stories/pdf/prospectus/prospectus2009.pdf>

- Shimane University, Center for International Exchanges. (n.d. a). 島根大学海外協定校一覽 *Inter-University Agreements*. Retrieved from <http://kokusai.shimane-u.ac.jp/pdf/kyouteilist.pdf>
- Shimane University, Center for International Exchanges. (n.d. b). *Study in Japan*. Retrieved from <http://kokusai.shimane-u.ac.jp/indexENG.htm>
- Slodkowski, A. (2009, July 8). Job fair finds slim pickings: More bilingual students come calling but fewer employers turn out [Electronic version]. *The Japan Times*.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Institute for Statistics. (2008). *Global Education Digest 2008: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World*. Quebec: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.