

# Study Abroad: Past, Present, and Future

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### Abstract

The history of study abroad of Japanese students and the reasons for it are complex. There has been a great change in the numbers of students and their reasons for going over the past 200 years. At the current time, the number of students choosing to go abroad from Japan is falling for several reasons, including economic and social, while the number is increasing in other countries. This paper examines the development of study abroad of Japanese from the time of the Meiji restoration to the present day, the reasons for the current fall in interest, and finally, how the students who do go abroad can be supported in their preparation for making the best of their time there.

### The History of Study Abroad for Japanese

Study abroad has changed drastically for the Japanese since the first forays into overseas education in the 7<sup>th</sup> century through to the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Japan sent students to China (Kobayashi, 2018) and then again in the early years of the Meiji period. After the almost complete isolation of Japan for 200 years, Japan changed its attitude during the Meiji Restoration, 1868-1912 (Britannica, 2024). In fact, study abroad actually started during the last years of the shogunate and a total of 500 scholars (all male) were dispatched abroad between 1886 and 1872 (Ministry of Culture, Education, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan, 2024). This may seem like a small number when we consider the number of people who go abroad to study at the present time, 3.1 million in 2022 (Statista Research Department, 2024), but opportunities, funding, advances in modern transportation, and motivation for study abroad have led to these differences. Moreover, the length of study, an expectation of years compared to weeks with opportunities for shorter ‘holiday’ like options, type of study, and academic versus conversation based, have changed the “study abroad” experience into an industry. In the past, studying abroad was a long-term commitment and even a sacrifice. Students wouldn’t see their family for years, whilst struggling on their own with language and cultural differences. Meiji was a time of great change, not just political, but also economic and social as well. This saw a change in

## Fukuhara

attitudes and the wish of the elite and leaders for the country to be more developed and become a player on the world stage (Britannica, 2024). To do this they wanted to modernize and westernize the country. In addition, they were interested in introducing Western culture, too. To do this they saw a need to train young men to make them capable of enabling the development of the country and were keen for them to learn from Western education. This was one of the main reasons why the first people allowed to travel abroad and take advantage of the new openness and interest in learning from the West were young men, mostly from the samurai and high ranks of society. They were limited in number, 250 by 1873, five years after the start of the Meiji era. However, these young men were not always the most suitable, being chosen for their rank and influence rather than their scholarly interests and abilities (Ministry of Culture, Education, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan, 2024).

Adopting the slogan “Enrich the country, strengthen the army” (“Fukoku kyōhei”), the government wanted to “create a nation-state capable of standing equal among Western powers. Knowledge was to be sought in the West, the goodwill which was essential for revising the unequal treaties that had been enacted and for granting of judicial and economic privileges in Japan by foreign countries through extraterritoriality.” (Britannica, 2024). The Charter Oath of April 1868 was written to lay out the goals of the new government which committed the government to establishing “deliberative assemblies” and “public discussion,” to a worldwide search for knowledge, to the abolition of past customs, and to the pursuit by all Japanese of their individual callings (Britannica, 2024).

These efforts at modernization required Western science and technology, and, under the banner of “Civilization and Enlightenment” (“Bunmei kaika”), Western culture, from current intellectual trends to clothing and architecture, was widely promoted. However, there was a turn again towards traditional Japanese values in the 1880s (Britannica, 2024).

Another reform was in the area of education. Japan’s first Ministry of Education was established in 1871 to develop a national system of education; it led to the public announcement of the Gakusei, or Education System Order, in 1872, and to the introduction of universal education in the country, which initially put emphasis on Western learning (Britannica, 2024).

Wholesale Westernization was somewhat checked in the 1880s, however, when a renewed appreciation of traditional Japanese values surfaced. This was the case in the

development of a modern educational system that, although shaped by Western theory and practice, emphasized the traditional values of samurai loyalty and social harmony. Those precepts were codified in 1890 with the enactment of the Imperial Rescript on Education (Kyōiku Chokugo). The same tendency prevailed in art and literature, where Western styles were first imitated, and then a more selective blending of Western and Japanese tastes was achieved (Britannica, 2024).

By 1873 the government had realized that the young men they were sending abroad, who were mostly from the samurai class, were not perhaps the best suited to academics and bringing back the knowledge and experience that would be necessary for the development and growth of the country. Of the 373 people studying abroad, they recalled 250, which was all of the government-sponsored students (Ministry of Culture, Education, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan, 2024). Following this the government chose just 11 people to study abroad: nine were sent to the United States, one to France, and one to Germany. The government subsidized their students as it was seen as a way to gain instructors who would train the next generation of Japanese educators domestically when they returned to Japan at the end of their studies. This way they could domestically produce the people who would build and lead the country in the next generation reducing the need to send people abroad or to employ foreigners within Japan. Over the next decade, 1875-1885, there were never more than 26 students abroad on Department of Education Scholarships in any year. Their courses of study were mostly in the fields of law, chemistry, and engineering while three students in 1875 pursued teacher training (Ministry of Culture, Education, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan, 2024). This number is rather small considering the previously mentioned intentions of the government to expand its own body of educators.

At the beginning of the Meiji era much of the higher education in Japan was taught by foreigners. This covered mostly science subjects. At the time of the Meiji restoration, the number of foreign teachers in Japan was extremely small, so it was necessary for people to go outside of Japan to get a Western/modern education. However, as the Meiji era progressed, and beyond into Showa, the number of foreign educators continued to grow, despite the country's attempt to grow its own bank of teachers. In the almost 40 years from 1874 to 1923 the number of foreign teachers in Japan grew to double the number from 77 to 155 (Ministry of Culture, Education, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan,

2024). It is not clear why the number of foreign teachers continued to increase when the government was trying so hard to train their own. However, one reason could be that they just could not keep up with the number of teachers they needed to educate the volume of people required to help grow the country in the direction they wanted.

### The Current Situation

The falling number of Japanese young people interested in studying abroad seems to go beyond being just the result of the falling birthrate according to Tanikawa (2011) and Kobayashi (2018) agrees, stating that although there was a reduction of 20% in 18-year-olds, this one-fifth reduction in the birth rate does not fully account for the one-third, or 33% reduction in study abroad. The remaining 13% must be due to some other factor(s). Tanikawa continues discussing this fall saying, "It is also strikingly inconsistent with the direction that the leading Japanese employers say they want to take, as they seek to expand their global reach in search of new markets. Their strategy relies on internationally savvy young talent. "There is clearly a mismatch between what the corporate recruiters are looking for and the college job seekers," whose skills do not match the employers' requirements, said Hitomi Okazaki, editor-in-chief of Riku-nabi, the leading job-search Web site in Japan." (Tanikawa, 2011)

Reluctance to study abroad according to Naoki Ogi, a college professor, quoted in Tanikawa (2011), was that "Young Japanese were increasingly becoming introverted and risk-averse," Mr. Ogi said, and were unwilling and ill-prepared to take on new challenges. He added that he believed their lack of interest in going abroad was part of that growing unease with the unknown and the challenging. "They are growing weak and feeble mentally and some even lack the basic survival instincts," he said." In contrast, Kobayashi (2018) does not believe this is the case and suggests systemic obstacles are the cause.

"The Japanese Ministry of Education, along with individual universities, is pushing students to study overseas and become internationalized, but despite this, the number of students studying abroad is decreasing year by year. Furthermore, in his 2011 article "Naze ryugakubanare wa okotteiru no ka?" (Why are students no longer studying abroad?), Hiroshi Ota notes that the number of Japanese studying abroad remained relatively stable at 75,000 since 1999" (Ikemoto, 2014). This number increased once in 2004 to 82,945, but since this point, the number has continued to decrease. Kobayashi (2018) stated that study

## Study Abroad: Past, Present, and Future

abroad had dropped from this high by almost one-third to 57,501 in 2011. “On the other hand, the worldwide number of people studying abroad increased fourfold in the period from 1975 to 2008, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Additionally, about half of Japanese studying abroad choose the US as their destination, but this number also is a downward trend compared with other Asian countries like China and Korea. It seems clear that fewer Japanese students are choosing to spend time studying abroad. Mr. Ota asserts that this trend poses a serious problem for Japan because contemporary young people will be increasingly important in the global society of the future.” (Ikemoto, 2014).

At the present time, economic factors must have an influence on study abroad. As it was in 2011, tuition in other countries was rising (Tanikawa, 2011) making it more expensive to study abroad, the current extremely weak yen coupled with continued tuition increases must make it even more difficult for families to make it possible for their members to go abroad no matter the strength of the inclination to go.

Now, the great days of leaving the country with the noble aim of learning and bringing back knowledge to advance the country are gone. The motivation for study abroad now is much more self-oriented (Kobayashi, 2018), with the aim of advancing the individual's career prospects, self-development, or simply for adventure. For many of the author's students who go on short-term, a month or less, study abroad in their vacation time between semesters this represents the chance just to visit another country and this holds almost as much sway as the opportunity to learn English. On the other hand, those who choose to go abroad for a longer period are more concerned about what they can learn.

In a survey conducted by the Japan Student Services Organization, it was found that 80% of Japanese companies want to hire workers who have studied or lived in another country. However, the inclination of Japanese students to go abroad to study has fallen (Su, 2021).

The peak of study abroad occurred in 2004 when 83,000 students ventured to other countries to follow their studies and dreams. However, this number had fallen to under 60,000 a year by 2019. This is in sharp contrast to other major countries such as the USA, China, and South Korea which all have more than 100,000 students going abroad each year. A breakdown of the numbers is as follows: for the USA about 350,000 out of a student population of 16 million or 2.2% (Hoke, 2023) , for China, 700,000 out of a student population

of 40 million or 1.75% (Textor, 2023), and for South Korea about 300,000 out of a student population of roughly 2 million or 15% studied abroad in 2019 (Yoon, 2024). At the same time as this fall in Japanese students wishing to study abroad, there has been a similar reduction in the number of people looking to work or live abroad. In a survey of people between the ages of 13 and 29 conducted by the Japan Cabinet Office in 2019 it showed that amongst the respondents from the USA, China, South Korea, and Japan, only Japan had a less than 50% response rate for students wanting to study, work, or live abroad. This has been a trend that has been developing for some time and in 2017, 60% of new hires had no desire to study, live, or work abroad (Su, 2021). This is a more than two-fold increase from 29% in 2001. This may not seem like much, but if the domestic population has no desire to learn to communicate or keep up with the latest developments and techniques in research, then it seems like the country has come full circle to an age before the restoration when the country was not willing to interact with the outside world. It seems we are failing at exactly what the government set out to do over 150 years ago at the start of the Meiji restoration. How can Japan be a world player when its citizens have little interest in visiting, understanding and or learning from the outside world? Perhaps the youth of today believe we have learned all we need to from the world at large and it is no longer necessary to venture out. This is sadly not the case, however, and this lack of motivation to experience other cultures and pursue studies can have a profound effect on business and the economy of Japan. If there is a lack of people willing to go abroad from Japanese companies to work in overseas branches, then this lack of staff will mean a reduction in international business or the ability of companies to expand at the rate they could do. This in turn will mean a reduction in domestic business (Su, 2021). Su goes on to state that the government is taking measures to counteract this worrying trend. The government suggests that education be revised to encourage young people to get a “global mentality” which they defined as “a greater interest in interacting with foreign countries and peoples” (Su, 2021). In addition, it has set a goal of having 100,000 students studying abroad by 2027, returning the number studying abroad to pre-COVID-19 levels (Miura, 2022) To accomplish this, they said that schools need to introduce daily life in other countries and introduce how young people there think. In addition, the government has introduced a requirement for English in elementary schools from 2020 (Su, 2021). These are great ideas, but to accomplish this will take a lot of work and revision of the curriculum as well as retraining

of teachers. Being a school teacher in Japan is already a very demanding job with long hours – much longer than those required in other countries according to *The Mainichi Newspaper* (Mito, 2019) which stated that Japanese teachers had the longest working hours of all the 48 countries and regions they surveyed. It is going to take time to make the change, and in the meantime, a whole generation of Japanese who could work/study abroad may be lost. However, all may not be lost as Japan itself is becoming a more multicultural country with many nationalities here to study, live, and work. According to statistics (Statista Research Department, 2024), there was an increase of 660,000 foreigners living in Japan between 2013 and 2019, although some of that increase was lost due to Covid. Currently, as of 2022, there are 3.1 million foreigners in Japan who make up less than 3% of the population. This may seem like a large number but in fact, when compared to other countries, the size of the foreigner population is quite small and Japan still has quite a way to go to catch up with some other countries. For example, in the UK the number of foreign residents is roughly 10 million people, or 14.8% of the population according to June 2022 statistics from the Immigration Advice Service (Immigration Advice Service, 2024). As of November 1, 2022, the number of foreign residents in South Korea stood at around 2.258 million people, a 5.8 percent jump from a year earlier, according to a report released by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety. It marks the largest foreign population in the country since relevant statistics were first compiled in 2006, with foreigners accounting for 4.4 percent of the total population last year (Kim, 2023). About 45 million people living in the United States in 2021 were born in other countries, 13.4% of the population (Congressional Budget Office, 2024). China has not yet fully recovered from the effects of the Covid virus. According to figures from 2019 the foreign population was back to 85% of pre-Covid levels (Han, 2024). China right now has relatively few residents who were born in a foreign country – there are now only around 1 million foreign-born residents in China, which represents less than 0.1% of the population. In fact, China has the smallest number of international migrants of any major country in the world. When we compare its 0.1% of immigrants with the almost 14 % in the US and 18% in Germany. Even Japan and South Korea – which historically have not been high-immigration countries – have higher percentages of foreign-born population, 2% in Japan and 4% in South Korea (Poston, 2023). From these numbers it can be seen that the numbers of foreign residents in the Asian countries, including Japan, are much lower than those for Western countries. Despite



increases in the number of foreign residents in all mentioned countries, some show very small numbers which preserve the monocultural environment of the country. For Japan this means that they still need higher numbers of foreigners to have much effect on the attitudes of the youth.

Kobayashi (2018) indicated four reasons for the reduction in studying abroad: economic concerns, conflict with job hunting, linguistic anxiety, and fixed ideas among educators. We have already looked at the weak yen as a possible cause but this is compounded by the fact that Japanese salaries have barely changed in the last 30 years in comparison to the US and Europe where salaries have steadily risen (Kanaoka, 2024); (Toh & Jozuka, 2023). At the time of the bubble economy, Japanese salaries were among the best in the world, now they only earn  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an equivalent job in America (The Associated Press, 2023). With families struggling to keep up with the cost of living coupled with the weak yen, it is no wonder they can not afford to send their children overseas.

Job hunting may not seem something that would affect study abroad. However, when you consider the fact that Japanese companies prefer to hire new graduates, so much so that students without a job offer before graduation will intentionally fail a class so that they can stay at university another year and keep looking for a job (Burgess, 2011), it becomes more obvious. Students who go abroad in their third or final year would not be in the country to apply and attend interviews. Also, according to Kobayashi (2018), this is the time when companies have internships for third and fourth-year students. Going abroad at this time would mean the student could not get the experience needed to make an impression on an employer.

Linguistic anxiety has long been something discussed among teachers in the author's experience. Japanese students are afraid of making mistakes as they have been taught for the test their entire academic life. Practical communication skills have been neglected and they therefore have no confidence in their abilities to communicate and are resultingly reticent to take the plunge into a new language environment (Kobayashi, 2018).

The final issue brought up by Kobayashi is that of fixed ideas amongst educators. He states that study abroad is considered something only for the best students. Teachers with this view will not encourage, and perhaps actively discourage students they do not consider worthy of pursuing study outside of Japan, even when the student shows motivation to do so.

Having looked at some of the reasons for the lack of willingness to study abroad, we are now going to consider how we can help students to be successful when they do go abroad.

### Research

Looking at the problem from the other side, I wanted to know how we can help those students who want to study abroad to have a positive and successful experience when they do go overseas. In August 2024 I interviewed several educators in the UK about what they saw as lacking in their incoming international students. The answers were quite surprising. While the author expected that the answers would focus mainly on academic weaknesses, and there were a few of those, the majority of problems focused on social, cultural, and maturity issues.

The first interviewee worked as an instructor for a private company in the United Kingdom that ran a year-long foundation course for students who wanted to study at the local university. The course ran from 9:00 to 4:00, five days a week, from September to July. This covered all four skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, in preparation for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test – an English Language proficiency test developed and run by the British Council in partnership with IDP Education and Cambridge Assessment English (IELTS, 2024). Students were expected to improve their English skills enough to move into regular studies with native-speaking classmates. The students come in with different levels of IELTS scores and an average of an improvement of half a grade per term is what can be reasonably expected. Different majors have different minimum IELTS requirements, so starting points and goals may vary. This institution also offered a shorter summer course from June to August as an introduction and preparation for university classes. The majority of students at this first institution were from the Middle East.

The second institution was a university. When asked what tests they accepted for entry to the institution, they informed the author that only the IELTS test is acceptable. This is not an arbitrary decision by the school, but part of the student visa requirements set by the British Government. IELTS is the only acceptable language test that will allow for full-time study at a university in the UK. A full 25% of this university's student body came from overseas, so having a good system in place is essential. In addition, they rely

heavily on the Asian market for students, with Chinese making up the majority and bringing in a huge revenue to the institution. Initially the school saw little effect on their student numbers and therefore income after Covid as other schools had. However, that has now changed and the institution saw a drop in students and an over £1 million drop in revenue showing just how important international students can be to an institution. The school had run all foundation courses itself in the past, but in more recent years they had outsourced their incoming international student foundation courses to an outside company (not the same as the one mentioned in the above interview). They also run their own, optional, pre-sessional courses for international students. It was found that even if a student had reached the required IELTS level to be able to enter the university as a regular undergraduate student, they performed better in tests, classwork assessment, and essays in the course of their regular studies, if they had taken the four-week pre-sessional course. The staff speculated that learning for the test does not necessarily mean that they are truly equipped to write in the university environment. In particular, they mentioned essay writing. Although students were aware of the standard five-paragraph essay format, they still seemed unable to tie it together with a single idea running through it – they ended up with five paragraphs that somehow lacked cohesion. Outside of academics, staff also discussed the lack of street smarts and general awareness, particularly among Japanese students. Getting drawn into conversations and situations on the street was one example given. Japanese tend to be very conformist and grow up learning not to be impolite – if someone addresses you, you should respond. Of course, this is not what many local people would do, they would assess the situation, perhaps acknowledge their interlocutor(s) with a nod or a word, and keep moving, not wanting to be drawn into something.

The third institution was another university, but on the other side of the country from the first. It had individual visiting students as well as exchange programs with universities around the world. At this institution, as with the previous one, the majority of the international students were Chinese. Students need a B2 to C1 level and the study abroad students who are science majors need an IELTS score of 6.5 or higher and a minimum of 7.0 for Arts majors. A minimum of a B2 or an IELTS of 5.5 for each part is necessary for students to start a foundation course that lasts a semester. In that semester they would be expected to raise their level enough to meet the minimum entry requirements for the faculty they wish to enter. Looking for special treatment – where most international

students turn up at campus by a required date to move into accommodation and start classes – Japanese students were wanting to be met at the airport and shown to their accommodation. There was a high level of hand-holding that was expected by Japanese students and the educator indicated that this was just not feasible. With a full 45% of students being from outside the UK (UCAS, 2024) the number of Japanese students is very small when compared with the overall international student population, according to the interviewee. Since 45% of the students are international and the total number of students in 2022 was 10,425 (University of St Andrews, 2024) this means that almost 5,000 students at the school are international students. This really does help to bring home the point that special treatment cannot be arranged for one small group of students.

The fourth and final educator is one who scouts students from Japan and organizes international study abroad, both short term summer programs and full-time university courses, for the performing arts, in particular ballet. Once scouted through a summer program or general application and audition, and offered a place to study, it is up to the students to organize their own English proficiency study and to take the IELTS test to qualify for a visa. Changes have been made over the last five years that allow students who in the past needed an overall IELTS score of 6.5 before being accepted to the program, to be accepted with a 5.5 and continue to study English while taking classes. Despite this helping to get students in art programs through the door, it is possible for students in this program to start the course from the age of 16. Starting at a younger age means that they will have had less exposure to English in the classroom and less formal education, therefore attaining even a 5.5 can be very difficult. Another reason the English language proficiency requirement is hard to attain is that athletes and dancers spend so much time training and do not concentrate on academic studies. It is not possible to train at a level to become professional and give the same time to academic study as other students do. In addition to these academic struggles, the educator also indicated that maturity and a general understanding or awareness of their surroundings was lacking in some students, particularly the younger ones.

With the exception of one interviewee the majority of international students that the institutions deal with are not Japanese so we cannot expect schools to go out of their way to make special accommodations just for the small number of Japanese students. What educators in Japan need to do is to prepare students for study abroad not only

## Fukuhara

academically but also culturally and with general life skills and independence.

Gifted children and their teachers and coaches should give some priority to language skills if they anticipate the possibility of students going abroad and therefore needing English Language requirements for visas or just to participate in practice.

### Conclusion

There have been definite ups and downs of study abroad for Japanese over the centuries. The current downturn in the number of students wanting to take the plunge to go overseas goes against the trends for the rest of the world. This is something that cannot be so easily reversed as the obstacles are not only personal, but financial, institutional, and governmental also. Despite this reduction in study abroad, there are still many young people who see it as an important part of their education. Once students have overcome the many obstacles to going abroad, we should look at how to best prepare them so that it can be a successful and rewarding experience that they can see through to the end. To do this we need to not only prepare our students to qualify to go abroad, by teaching for the English language proficiency exams, but also prepare them for the reality of life in another country. This means not only skills for the academic setting, which in themselves are different from exam skills, but also cultural understanding and social and personal skills, too. The author recommends that all students, not just those preparing for study abroad, should have classes that cover more than just language. They should cover cultural points, social norms, and interactions so that all language students come out with not just linguistic confidence, but also the ability to interact easily with native speakers. Until the social contract is understood, then you cannot say that a language is fully understood.

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