

# Investigating the Reasons for Japanese University Students' Hesitation in Studying Abroad: Implications for Enhancing University Study Abroad Programs

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## Abstract

While several studies on study abroad have examined the impact of personal factors (e.g., gender, age, and family environment) on the decision to study abroad, a factor analysis has not yet been conducted on the reasons why some students choose not to study abroad. This paper highlights the role of academic study abroad programs in promoting global citizenship and internationalization within Japanese universities, driven by efforts of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting government policies and international travel, many uncertainties need to be addressed within university study abroad programs. To provide deeper insights, this research uses exploratory factor analysis to uncover common factors that influence the wants and needs of Japanese students considering study abroad programs. The subjects ( $n = 378$ ) were first- to fourth-year university students of intermediate English language proficiency in the Kanto and Chubu areas of Japan. The research results indicate four main factors of Japanese university students who did not consider study abroad programs from 2021 to 2022 providing useful data for university administrators to create successful international experiences that support and address the needs of Japanese university students.

**Keywords:** study abroad, factor analysis, internationalization

## Introduction

Academic study abroad programs have been recognized as unique opportunities for students to achieve outcomes related to global citizenship (Douglas et al., 2018). These programs also play a crucial role in promoting internationalization within Japanese universities, and in fact have been mandated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The Japanese government has actively promoted an increase in the number of domestic students studying abroad, with a goal of allocating two billion yen annually in scholarships for overseas university education, in order to meet the growing need for Japanese society to become more internationally oriented (Tanikawa, 2011). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant uncertainty and has impacted

government policies, leaving various unknown factors that still need to be addressed. Therefore, it is essential to focus on outcomes-based assessment of study abroad programs to ensure their effectiveness in meeting the changing needs of Japanese students (Yonezawa, 2014).

In order to address this uncertainty, further research using exploratory factor analysis can provide a deeper understanding of the desires and requirements of students considering continued education abroad, as well as the offerings currently available by universities. This approach allows the researcher to use observed variables, such as the reasons for not considering study abroad programs as indicators to uncover common underlying factors that influence these latent variables. By examining the results of such research, university administrators can gain valuable insights to create a blueprint for successful international experiences that align with the needs and expectations of Japanese university students.

The findings presented in this paper shed light on the changing reasons expressed by Japanese students who were not considering study abroad programs between 2021 and 2022. The data obtained from this research can be instrumental for university administrators in developing strategies that cater to the evolving needs of Japanese students, ensuring that study abroad programs remain relevant and effective in promoting global citizenship and internationalization. As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, it is imperative to adapt study abroad programs to align with the changing expectations and aspirations of students, while also taking into consideration external factors such as government policies and the impact of global events. The current research fills a gap in the literature by assessing post-COVID-19 attitudes of students to studying abroad at a time when many universities are restarting their study abroad programs.

### **Literature Review**

Over the past decade, the Japanese government has been actively promoting study abroad programs as part of its efforts to prioritize human resource development at universities. This has been achieved through various initiatives such as the University Globalization Cooperation Program and the Super Global University Creation Support Program (MEXT, n.d.). In 2014, the Tobitate! study abroad initiative was also introduced with the ambitious goal of doubling the number of Japanese university students studying abroad from 60,000 to 120,000 by 2020.

However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, official data from the MEXT showed a decrease in the number of Japanese university students studying abroad. There was a trend of fewer students opting for longer study abroad programs of more than six months, with growing interest in shorter-term programs of under six months (Nowlan & Wang, 2018; OECD, 2016; Ota, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation, as many universities cancelled study abroad programs in 2020 and 2021. According to MEXT, the number of Japanese students studying abroad plummeted by 98.6% in 2020 compared to 2018, largely due to the impact of the pandemic. Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that over 3.9 million

international students were affected by university and border closures during the pandemic (OECD, 2021). As a result, the number of Japanese students studying abroad drastically declined from 115,146 in 2018 to a mere 1,487 in 2020 (JASSO, 2020).

In response to these challenges, online study abroad initiatives, such as online international cooperative learning and virtual exchange, have gained popularity as an alternative to physical travel. This shift has brought about changes in positions and attitudes towards study abroad, as students are now able to have a study abroad experience without actually leaving the country (OECD, 2021). A survey conducted by Ota (2018) highlighted a possible factor behind this trend—a perceived lack of support from universities for study abroad. Sakurai et al. (2010) also raised concerns about the perception of foreign countries as dangerous and the impact of the job market in Japan on students' decision to study abroad.

Furthermore, data from the OECD and the Institute for International Education (IIE) revealed a 6% decrease in the number of Japanese students studying abroad over the past five years. These findings suggest that conservative and introverted attitudes among university students, as well as uncertainty caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, are significant barriers to study abroad in today's globalized society. Therefore, considering these obstacles and the declining trend in Japanese students studying abroad, it is evident that there is a pressing need to construct study abroad programs that truly cater to the needs of the students, underlining the critical role of program coordinators in this process.

Another important research finding about study abroad states that comprehending the fundamentals of cognitive development and learning processes is essential for coordinators of study abroad programs to identify possible hurdles and formulate experiences that cater to the needs of their students, both as a group and as individual learners (Engle & Engle, 2004). This understanding encompasses the creation of an environment that motivates students to step outside of their comfort zones, which is a fundamental component of the study abroad experience. Simultaneously, it's important to ensure that the challenges presented are neither overly intimidating or perilous to the point of becoming unsafe, unethical, or inhibiting learning. According to Citron and Kline (2001), the most effective learning often takes place when students are gently urged beyond their comfort zones, but not to the point of excessive stress. This principle suggests that an optimum level of anxiety often results in the most favorable learning outcomes. When the level of anxiety is too low, the desire to learn may be reduced, and when it's too high, the learning process could be impeded. This principle is especially relevant in the context of studying abroad, where students are likely to face new and potentially challenging situations (Drebring et al., 1995). Also, considering the challenges and trends highlighted above, it becomes crucial for faculty and staff involved in study abroad programs to be well-versed with these principles to ensure they can deliver appropriate experiences for students. Apart from preparing students for new educational experiences, it is critical that they can participate in individual and collective introspection and examination of their experiences post-study abroad. It's not just about

having the skills to facilitate such reflection and analysis, but it's also about understanding and integrating the concerns and expectations of learners into the design of the study abroad programs. A comprehensive understanding of the students who express a desire to study abroad is key for the successful execution of such programs. Thus, this study investigates how they perceive study abroad and what they hope to gain through this experience. It will then present the decisive factors in their decision to study abroad, as revealed through these findings.

To address these uncertainties, research utilizing exploratory factor analysis can provide a deeper understanding of the desires and needs of students considering continued education abroad, as well as the offerings currently provided by universities. The findings of such research can have practical implications for university administrators in creating a blueprint for successful international experiences that cater to the needs of Japanese university students. By understanding the changing reasons of Japanese students who are not considering study abroad programs, universities can tailor their offerings to address these concerns and encourage more students.

### **Research Questions**

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors influenced students' decisions not to consider studying abroad?
2. What is the possible way to deal with those factors to encourage students to study abroad?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Participants**

The present study was conducted at two private universities located in the Kanto and Chubu areas in Japan during the years 2021 and 2022. Participants in this study were Japanese university students who were enrolled in the 1st to 4th years, as well as students who remained in their 5th year. Participation in the study was voluntary, and a total of 201 participants answered the questionnaire in 2021, and 177 participants answered in 2022. Therefore, the total number of participants in this research was 378. The sample was obtained using a convenience sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method where participants were selected based on their easy accessibility and readiness to participate in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). Prior to participating in the study, participants were required to sign a consent form, indicating their willingness to take part. They were informed that they could withdraw from the project at any time without any negative impact on their academic performance or grades.

The utilization of convenience sampling in this study provides a basis for employing Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). EFA is designed to reveal underlying structures within a data set and is particularly well-suited to convenience sampling, despite its potential for bias, due to its capability to handle large, diverse data sets (Fabrigar & Wegener, 2012). Furthermore, the size of the sample in this study (378 participants) provides a sufficiently broad base for the EFA. The voluntary

nature of participation might have promoted authenticity in participant responses, further facilitating accurate factor analysis. Hence, the sampling method adopted in this study supports the use of EFA for the data analysis.

### Survey Questions

To determine the questionnaire items, reports from students who participated in short-term study abroad programs over the past five years were reviewed. A total of 33 items that seemed applicable to Japanese students were extracted, comparing what the students had learned and acquired at their overseas location, with a pre-survey form about study abroad expectations and motivations, created by Anderson and Lawton (2015). The response method adopted was a 5-point Likert scale (1. *Strongly Disagree*, 2. *Somewhat Disagree*, 3. *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4. *Somewhat Agree*, 5. *Strongly Agree*). Furthermore, an open answer section was added to the questionnaire to allow students to elaborate on their reasons for wanting to study abroad, what they hoped to gain from studying abroad, and any additional comments.

Table 1

#### *List of Survey Questions*

Q1	Because of terrorism, other dangers and crime	1	2	3	4	5
Q2	Because foreign countries are frightening	1	2	3	4	5
Q3	Because there are many natural disasters such as earthquakes	1	2	3	4	5
Q4	Because transportation is inconvenient	1	2	3	4	5
Q5	Because my family is against it	1	2	3	4	5
Q6	Because I am too young to study abroad	1	2	3	4	5
Q7	Because I don't know how to study abroad	1	2	3	4	5
Q8	Because I don't have enough language skills	1	2	3	4	5
Q9	Because of lack of information about the program	1	2	3	4	5
Q10	Because my friends and peers are not going	1	2	3	4	5
Q11	Because of the possibility of extending my graduation	1	2	3	4	5
Q12	Because I must take care of my family	1	2	3	4	5
Q13	Because it affects my job hunting	1	2	3	4	5
Q14	Because foreigners are not friendly	1	2	3	4	5
Q15	Because of financial cost	1	2	3	4	5

Note: 1. *Strongly Disagree*, 2. *Somewhat Disagree*, 3. *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4. *Somewhat Agree*, 5. *Strongly Agree*

The pilot study, serving as a precursor to the main survey, was carried out within the same universities in Kanagawa and Aichi prefectures, beginning of the spring semester of 2020. Its aim was to discern the specific reasons behind some students' lack of interest in studying abroad. Twenty

participants were selected randomly from these universities and asked to answer the survey. The insights garnered from the survey informed the development of the questionnaire items.

To ensure the reliability of the survey questions, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) was calculated to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The coefficient, which measures the extent to which individuals consistently answer similar questions in the same way, was found to be 0.8, indicating high reliability. As a result, the 15 reasons identified in the preliminary survey were used as the questions in the main survey questionnaire shown in Table 1.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data collection was facilitated through an online questionnaire, ensuring participant anonymity via the distribution of a Google Form survey link. This questionnaire incorporated the 15 identified reasons for not wanting to study abroad, alongside demographic information such as age, gender, and academic year. Participants were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale with an additional option to provide further comments or clarifications.

As for the utilization of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), this method was employed to discern any underlying factor structures in the dataset derived from the main survey. EFA aims to simplify data interpretation by reducing its dimensionality (Fabrigar et al., 1999). In this study, EFA was applied to the 15 reasons that might prevent students from studying abroad, these being the key variables.

The survey items with factor loadings below 0.4 were not used, as these indicate a lack of substantial correlation with the identified factor. Essentially, factor loadings represent the strength of the relationship between an item and a factor, with values above 0.4 signifying a strong correlation. When the correlation between an item and a factor is weak, it may hinder the interpretation of the factor and could also compromise the reliability and validity of the analysis. Moreover, eliminating items with factor loadings below 0.4 can improve the fit of the model and reduce the likelihood of leading to erroneous conclusions. Since factor analysis is a technique to identify common factors from multiple items, it's crucial that each item effectively represents its corresponding factor (Costello & Osborne, 2005). Therefore, in accordance with common practice in EFA, survey items with factor loadings below 0.4, *Because of financial cost* and *Because my friends and peers are not going*, were excluded from the analysis after first analysis. Then, the data were recalculated to ensure a more reliable and interpretable factor structure.

In terms of rotation, a promax rotation was chosen over varimax because it is a type of oblique rotation allowing for correlation among factors. This selection was based on the assumption that the 15 reasons for not wanting to study abroad could potentially interrelate. The flexibility offered by promax rotation, in contrast to orthogonal methods such as varimax rotation, reflects the complexity in the data in a more realistic manner (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

Regarding eigenvalues, they served as the criterion to determine the number of factors to retain in the EFA. Eigenvalues represent the total variance explained by each factor in the model. As per the Kaiser criterion, factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 were retained for they explain a significant proportion of the variance in the dataset (Kaiser, 1960).

### Data Analysis and Results

In order to extract the factors influencing the desire to study abroad from the data, the author conducted a factor analysis using Excel statistics. The results are summarized below in Table 2.

After conducting a thorough analysis of the collected data, four distinct factors were identified based on the correlations among the items. These factors were defined and named accordingly to reflect the underlying themes represented by the items within each factor, and they serve as potential barriers to Japanese students contemplating study abroad programs.

The first factor, identified as *Perceived Foreign Risk and Inconvenience*, portrayed significant apprehensions concerning the items such as *Because of terrorism, other dangers, and crime* (0.72) and *Because transportation is inconvenient* (0.57). The most substantial factor loading was related to the item, *Because foreign countries are frightening* (0.76). The concern *Because of terrorism, other dangers and crime* emerged as the highest rated, averaging 3.04 on a 5-point scale ( $SD = 1.23$ ). The second highest concern was *Because foreign countries are frightening*, with an average rating of 2.46. This data accentuates students' perceptions of foreign countries as being potentially hazardous, considerably more so than their domestic environments. Importantly, this factor contributed 34.14% to the total variance, signifying that it is the predominant element contributing to students' reluctance towards studying abroad. This outcome resonates with Zhang and Goodson's (2011) research, emphasizing the crucial role of unfamiliarity and fear as key impediments to studying abroad. As a result, it is incumbent upon universities and study abroad programs to prioritize the dissemination of accurate information about safety measures and protocols in host countries to effectively address these concerns.

The second factor, labeled *Information and Competency Barriers*, focuses on students' self-assessment of their preparedness for studying abroad. More specifically, this factor pertains to their feelings of being ill-equipped due to *lack of information about the program* (0.74), uncertainty regarding the study abroad process with *I don't know how to study abroad* (0.65), and perceived deficiency in language proficiency with *I don't have enough language skills* (0.48). This factor, contributing to a rate of 6.54%, highlights an overarching sense of unpreparedness. The item *Because I don't have enough language skills* garnered the highest average score on a 5-point Likert scale, implying that many students view their language proficiency as inadequate for study abroad experiences. Moreover, following the application of promax rotation to quantify factor correlations, a slight correlation was detected between this factor *Information and Competency Barriers* and the first factor *Perceived Foreign Risk and Inconvenience*. Therefore, it is crucial for universities to provide

comprehensive information about study abroad programs and help students improve their language skills before their study abroad to effectively mitigate these concerns.

The third factor, contributing 4.92%, was labeled as *Family Related Concerns*. This factor encompasses items such as *Because my family is against it*, underscoring the importance of familial considerations in students' decisions to study abroad. While this factor's contribution rate is less significant than the first two factors, the influence of family concerns should not be understated in the context of international education decisions.

Table 2

*Result of Factor Analysis Promax Rotation*

	Average	SD	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Because foreign countries are frightening	2.46	1.16	0.76	0.20	-0.03	-0.14
Because of terrorism, other dangers and crime	3.04	1.23	0.72	0.03	-0.12	0.08
Because foreigners are not friendly	2.00	0.91	0.62	0.09	0.14	0.04
Because there are many natural disasters such as earthquakes	2.15	0.97	0.61	-0.17	0.28	0.08
Because transportation is inconvenient	2.25	1.04	0.57	0.07	0.04	0.25
Because of lack of information about the program	3.10	1.19	0.00	0.74	-0.06	0.16
Because I don't know how to study abroad	2.78	1.25	0.09	0.65	0.12	-0.09
Because I don't have enough language skills	3.72	1.14	0.08	0.48	-0.04	-0.03
Because my family is against it	2.04	1.01	-0.02	-0.06	0.74	0.04
Because I am too young to study abroad	1.82	0.91	0.15	0.07	0.69	-0.12
Because I must take care of my family	2.18	1.03	-0.05	0.06	0.46	0.25
Because of the possibility of extending my graduation	2.93	1.25	-0.09	0.24	0.11	0.48
Because it affects my job hunting	2.68	1.20	0.26	-0.12	-0.04	0.46
Note: Due to factor loadings below 0.4, <i>Because of financial cost</i> and <i>Because my friends and peers are not going</i> are excluded.						
Contribution rate (%)			34.14%	6.54%	4.92%	3.65%
Cumulative contribution rate (%)			34.14%	40.69%	45.60%	49.25%
<i>n</i> = 378						
Correlation of Factors after Rotation						
			Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
	Factor 1		1.00	0.47	0.57	0.28
	Factor 2		0.47	1.00	0.39	0.32
	Factor 3		0.57	0.39	1.00	0.29
	Factor 4		0.28	0.32	0.29	1.00



The fourth factor, was labeled *Academic and Career Concerns*. It contributes 3.65% to the students' reluctance to study abroad. This factor is composed of items related to academic and career trajectory concerns such as *Because of the possibility of delaying my graduation* and *Because it affects my job hunting*. These concerns are particularly relevant considering the job search culture in Japan, where job hunting typically commences towards the end of the third year of university. Therefore, the potential impact of study abroad on academic progression and future career prospects are critical considerations for students.

During the data analysis process, two survey items—*Because of financial cost* and *Because my friends and peers are not going* were excluded due to their factor loadings scoring below 0.4, indicating their minimal correlation with any of the extracted factors. This exclusion criteria is based on common practice in exploratory factor analysis, where items with loadings below 0.4 are often considered not to contribute significantly to the interpretation of the factor (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

The findings from the data analysis reveal four main factors that contribute to students' reluctance to study abroad: *Perceived Foreign Risk and Inconvenience*, *Information and Competency Barriers*, *Family Related Concerns*, and *Academic and Career Concerns*. This labelling provides crucial insights for educators and study abroad coordinators in their efforts to design and promote programs that effectively address these concerns. Incorporating these factors into program development and promotional materials could lead to higher participation rates among Japanese university students in study abroad programs. It is also critical, however, to recognize the limitations and complexities inherent in addressing some of these concerns, especially those deeply embedded in cultural norms and expectations.

## Discussion

### Understanding the Perceived Risk of Study Abroad

The clarification of the first factor, *Perceived Foreign Risk and Inconvenience*, gives us a better understanding of the fears and worries that students face when considering studying abroad. A significant part of these apprehensions are associated with perceived safety (0.72), discomfort living abroad (0.57), and particularly a fear of foreign countries (0.76). This demonstrates that students' anxieties are not just about logistic challenges or language barriers, but are rooted deeply in fear and unfamiliarity, a finding that aligns with the research conclusions of Zhang and Goodson (2011). The survey item concerning *Because of terrorism, other dangers, and crime* emerged as the most significant worry (3.04 on a 5-point Likert scale), showing students perceive foreign countries as distinctly riskier than their home environment. This emphasizes the seriousness of these fears, making them a significant issue to address when promoting study abroad programs.

It is crucial to remember that such fears may be amplified by stereotypes and inaccurate media depictions of foreign countries. Thus, universities and study abroad initiatives should take action to

distribute accurate information regarding safety and living conditions in potential host countries. Williams (2005) also suggests that comprehensive preparation for living abroad, such as through pre-departure orientations, can help mitigate these anxieties and promote a better understanding of host countries.

This factor represented a significant 34.14% of the total variance in EFA, suggesting that effective interventions addressing these fears could substantially improve students' willingness to consider studying abroad. Salisbury et al. (2010) noted that addressing fears and unfamiliarity could lead to a marked increase in student participation in study abroad programs, suggesting the necessity for such focused measures.

Thus, the examination of the factor, *Perceived Foreign Risk and Inconvenience*, offers valuable insights into the fears preventing students from studying abroad. Understanding and effectively addressing these fears are critical steps toward enhancing students' openness to study abroad opportunities. However, it is essential to recognize that these fears might be magnified by stereotypes and media depictions of foreign nations, which may not accurately mirror actual circumstances. Therefore, universities and study abroad initiatives should strive to gather precise information and assurances regarding safety measures and transportation frameworks in host countries to alleviate these apprehensions. It is recommended that the study abroad process can be enhanced by supplying detailed, relevant information about host countries and facilitating cross-cultural understanding through pre-departure orientations.

### **Addressing Information Barriers**

The *Information and Competency Barriers* identified as the second factor reflects students' self-evaluations of readiness for study abroad experiences. The scarcity of current program information and self-perceived language proficiency are primary concerns. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has led to the suspension of numerous study abroad programs, causing existing information about costs, scholarships, and application procedures to potentially become outdated over approximately two years. Therefore, the information about study abroad needs to be carefully reviewed and updated to ensure its relevance and accuracy for prospective study abroad students.

The uncertainty regarding the accuracy and reliability of the information presents a substantial challenge for students making informed decisions about studying abroad, likely exacerbating the *Information and Competency Barriers*. Massey and Burrow (2012) found that potential study abroad participants heavily rely on insights from past exchange students regarding application procedures and suitable host institutions. The disruption of these traditional information sources by the pandemic has made access to reliable information even more challenging.

Given the significant changes brought about by the global pandemic, there is a unique opportunity for educational institutions to adapt and utilize the potential benefits of online learning platforms. This transition could not only address current barriers but also enhance the flexibility and

accessibility of these resources in the long term (Hodges et al., 2020). For instance, online language learning platforms can offer distinct benefits, such as exposure to various accents and cultures, immediate access to resources, and adaptive software that tailors the learning process to the individual's progress.

Moreover, the virtual study abroad created in response to pandemic-related restrictions can potentially alleviate some of the concerns. These programs provide an alternative means of gaining international exposure and cultural exchange, allowing students to familiarize themselves with the host culture and language from the safety and comfort of their homes (Radford et al., 2020).

Given these factors, it is critical for universities to harness the potential benefits of digital platforms. Thus, they could effectively address the *Information and Competency Barriers*, mitigate perceived threats and inconveniences associated with studying abroad, and potentially encourage more students to consider these opportunities.

### **Family Related Concerns, Academic Credits, and Future Career Opportunities**

The analysis highlighted *Family Related Concerns* as the third most influential factor, accounting for 4.92% of students' reluctance towards study abroad programs. Although its contribution is less than the first two factors, the weight of family considerations should not be trivialized in the context of decisions about study abroad. The influence of the family is deeply ingrained, and in contexts where family opinions are highly respected, their objections could potentially deter students from pursuing study abroad opportunities. Thus, it is crucial for educational institutions and study abroad programs to include family engagement strategies to facilitate understanding and approval of study abroad endeavors. Providing accessible and comprehensive information to both students and their families is necessary.

The fourth influential factor, *Academic and Career Concerns*, is also an area of significant consideration, contributing 3.65% to the students' reluctance to study abroad. The factor encapsulates concerns related to the potential extension of graduation timelines and the impacts on job hunting prospects. This resonates with the distinctive job search culture in Japan, where job hunting activities typically commence towards the end of the third year of university. Therefore, the implications of study abroad programs on academic progression and future career prospects are critical concerns for students. This highlights the necessity for higher education institutions and study abroad programs to offer clear guidance and support to students regarding how study abroad can be effectively integrated into their academic plans without hindering their graduation timelines or future job prospects. Additionally, partnerships between universities and industry could help in establishing internships or work placements for returning study abroad students, aiding them in translating their international experience into employable skills (Coco, 2000).

In addition, considering future careers, students must thoroughly research the curriculum at their home university and the destination institution, and plan to obtain necessary credits in advance. It

is important to note that in many universities there are limits on the number of credits that can be earned during the study abroad period, and ample time should be set aside to ensure that all required credits are completed prior to graduation. In addition, students in Japan begin job hunting from the end of their junior year, so they must engage in activities such as internships which can be time consuming. According to MEXT in Japan, searching for employment has a significant impact on students' future lives and careers, and thus it is essential to allocate sufficient time for these activities (MEXT, n.d) prior to graduation. MEXT also emphasizes the value of domestic internship experience for students. In fact, MEXT has promoted internships in Japan through their Basic Approach to the Promotion of Internships, citing the importance of developing practical human resources, reflecting the needs of industry in university education, promoting understanding of companies, and communicating the appeal of internships (MEXT, 2015).

Research has shown that internships can provide valuable skills and knowledge to students. Hargert (2009) found that internships can improve students' basic skills for employment, giving them an advantage in their job-hunting efforts. Gault et al. (2000) also found that internships can improve students' ability to adapt to working life after joining a company. Furthermore, the skills and knowledge gained through study abroad are generally considered valuable by employers. Potts (2015) stated that although overseas experience does not necessarily guarantee the development of global human resources in a one-way direction, hiring students with overseas experience, including internships, makes them more likely to be active as global human resources compared to students without such experience. Thus, it is essential for universities to acknowledge and address the four identified factors to better support students contemplating study abroad opportunities. As the global landscape of higher education continues to evolve after the pandemic, universities must adapt and innovate to ensure they are meeting the changing needs and concerns of their students.

### **Conclusions**

As higher education institutions continue to promote international education, they are also faced with the challenge of supporting students who are interested in studying abroad amidst the ongoing pandemic. Institutions need to closely monitor factors such as the number of students studying abroad, infection rates, travel restrictions, and quarantine requirements in the countries where students intend to study. While online study abroad programs, such as online international cooperative learning and virtual exchange, have emerged as alternative options that offer diversified educational methods (Witze, 2020), it is crucial to explore new educational approaches with the aim of the post-pandemic world.

A survey conducted by MEXT in 2020 on Japan's super-global universities revealed that nearly 90% of the 49 institutions expressed their intention to reevaluate their international programs with the goal of integrating physical study abroad and online education. Additionally, half of the institutions indicated that they intend to prioritize the quality of the program over the quantity of students in the post-COVID-19 era when it comes to sending and receiving international students (MEXT, 2020).

As university study abroad programs gradually reopen and opportunities for students to participate in overseas study increase, this study has identified the main factors that make students reluctant to study abroad. It is imperative for educational institutions with study abroad programs to understand these factors and effectively restructure their study abroad programs in the curriculum to address the changing needs of potential students in order to remain meaningful and attractive.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of understanding students' perspectives and concerns when it comes to studying abroad. By addressing the factors identified in this study, educational institutions can take steps to redesign their study abroad programs and make them more appealing and relevant to students in the current context. For example, institutions could consider incorporating online components into their study abroad programs, allowing students to gain international experiences through virtual means, while also ensuring the quality and rigor of the educational content. This could include virtual internships, virtual intercultural exchanges, and other innovative approaches that offer meaningful and engaging international experiences.

In addition, institutions could also provide more comprehensive support services to address the concerns identified in this study. For instance, offering pre-departure orientation programs that focus on cultural adaptation, safety protocols, and health and well-being, could help alleviate students' concerns about living and studying in a foreign country during the pandemic. Providing robust support systems, such as mental health services, emergency assistance, and regular check-ins, could also help students feel more supported and confident about their decision to study abroad.

Furthermore, institutions could collaborate with partner universities or organizations to develop joint programs that offer a blend of online and in-person components, providing students with the flexibility to choose the format that best suits their needs and comfort level. This could include opportunities for students to study online for a portion of the program, followed by a shorter period of in-person study abroad or vice versa. Such blended programs could offer students the benefits of both online and in-person experiences, while also addressing their concerns about the pandemic and travel restrictions.

In conclusion, while the COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges for study abroad programs, educational institutions need to adapt and redesign their programs to meet the changing needs and concerns. Therefore, the research findings and suggestions with the effectiveness of redesigned study abroad programs and assess the impact of different approaches on students' perceptions, attitudes, and outcomes related to studying abroad will guide educators, researchers, and school administrators. Also, investigation of the long-term impact of these programs on students' personal, academic, and career development, including factors such as cross-cultural competence, language proficiency, employment opportunities, and global citizenship could provide insights into the similarities and differences in students' attitudes and concerns related to studying abroad in the post-pandemic era.

### Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the study was conducted at two private universities in specific regions of Japan, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other universities or regions in Japan or beyond. It is important to recognize that cultural, institutional, and regional differences may impact the attitudes and perceptions of Japanese university students towards studying abroad. Therefore, different types of universities, such as public universities or specialized institutions, may have different student populations with varying attitudes and perceptions towards studying abroad. Future research could consider including a more diverse sample of universities to capture a broader range of perspectives. Also, to increase the reliability of the results, qualitative data, such as interviews, could offer more in-depth insights into the underlying factors influencing students' perceptions and attitudes towards studying abroad. This could help researchers and educators gain a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and challenges that Japanese university students face when considering studying abroad. By addressing these limitations and building upon the findings of this study, future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence Japanese university students' perceptions and attitudes towards studying abroad and inform strategies to promote study abroad opportunities among Japanese students.

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