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Challenges Faced by Japanese University Administrators Recruiting Students for Study Abroad Programs: A Case Study of The Pandemic and Its Aftermath

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Abstract

There is limited research into the issues faced by university administrators in recruiting students for study abroad programs. This study aimed to address this research gap by interviewing three Japanese university study abroad program administrators about their experiences between 2020 and 2023, a period which included the COVID-19 global pandemic. Using a case study design and inductive thematic analysis, the research identified several factors contributing to reduced participation: travel restrictions, financial concerns, fear of the unknown, limited prior experience, and the absence of returnee senpai (older student mentors). Additional challenges included managing information sessions, avoiding information overload, and establishing and maintaining two-way communication with students. Finally, administrators discussed initiatives they had undertaken aimed at increasing visibility of study abroad programs and communication with students. These initiatives appeared to be having a positive effect on student interest in study abroad, and administrators were

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generally optimistic about their ability to promote study abroad participation going forward.

Abstract in Japanese

大学の留学プログラムにおける学生募集に際して、大学職員が直面する課題については、これまで十分な研究が行われていない。本研究では、この研究上の空白を補うことを目的として、日本の大学で留学プログラムを担当する職員 3 名を対象に、COVID-19 の世界的流行を含む 2020 年から 2023 年までの経験についてインタビュー調査を行った。ケーススタディの手法と帰納的テーマ分析を用いて分析した結果、留学参加者数の減少に影響した要因として、渡航制限、経済的な懸念、未知の環境に対する不安、過去の海外経験の不足、そして留学経験を持つ先輩の不在が明らかになった。また、説明会の運営、学生の情報過多への対応、学生との双方向コミュニケーションの構築・維持も課題として挙げられた。さらに、担当職員は、留学プログラムの学内での認知度向上や学生とのコミュニケーション強化を目的として実施した取り組みについても述べた。これらの取り組みは学生の留学への関心に一定の好影響を与えているとみられ、担当職員は今後の留学参加促進について概して前向きな見通しを示していた。

Keywords

administration; case study; pandemic; recruitment; study abroad; university administrators

1. Introduction

Japanese study abroad participation has fluctuated over the past several decades due to various factors including economic conditions, internationalization initiatives, and changing attitudes toward overseas travel (Bradford, 2015). During the 2000s and early 2010s, there was much discussion in both public and academic circles about the idea of uchi-muki or “inward looking” youth and a resultant decline in interest in studying abroad (Ikemoto, 2013; Grimes-MacLellan, 2017). As such, some challenges associated with recruiting students for study abroad programs predate COVID-19, reflecting broader social and academic trends.

However, while Japan had previously faced some challenges in encouraging students to study abroad, it had never experienced disruption on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2019, the first cases of COVID-19, a highly

contagious coronavirus disease, were detected in Wuhan, China. What followed was a global pandemic that claimed millions of lives and disrupted the entire fabric of human society. Global study abroad activities were consequently severely disrupted. Indeed, at the university in this study, it was not until early to mid-2022, when travel restrictions and governmental warnings finally began to be lifted, that study abroad programs could once again begin to take place.

Considering Japan as a whole, the number of students who went overseas to study fell considerably in 2020 to just 7442 (ICEF Monitor, 2022) and 2021 saw an even lower number of Japanese students, just 6100 in total, studying abroad (ICEF Monitor, 2022). In 2022, there was a mild resurgence to around 29,500 students (ICEF Monitor, 2023), although this number remained considerably below that of the pre-pandemic period, which saw around 78,000 Japanese students heading overseas to study abroad in 2019 (ICEF Monitor, 2023).

While online study abroad programs were offered at the participants' university during the height of the pandemic, an approach explored in several other studies (Liu & Shirley, 2021; Gaitanidis, 2020; Matikainen & Cote, 2022), this research focuses instead on recruitment for traditional in-person programs that remained in place throughout the pandemic. Notably, it considers the post-restriction period of 2022–2023, during which international travel had resumed but student interest in study abroad remained muted. This was a time when the effects of the pandemic continued to shape perceptions and behavior, even after COVID-19 was no longer designated as "a public health emergency of international concern" (World Health Organization, 2023).

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, this study seeks to examine this period from the perspective of an often-overlooked group - those tasked with the administration of study abroad programs. It aims to understand how their jobs changed as a result of the pandemic, the specific challenges it posed, and the extent to which these challenges endured. While the focus is on the pandemic and its immediate aftermath, it is hoped that the findings will be relevant for future challenges or periods of uncertainty. Times of disruption often prompt institutions to examine their processes more critically than they might during periods of stability, revealing underlying issues that may otherwise go unnoticed. It is to this end that this study reflects not only upon a time of crisis, but also on the deeper institutional practices and assumptions that shaped how that crisis was experienced and managed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Factors Which Affect Students Studying Abroad

Several studies undertaken before the pandemic examined students and their propensity or otherwise to study abroad. One such study is Nowlan and Wang (2018), which highlighted six factors determined to be common in students who were likely or predisposed to study abroad. These were (1) greater achievement in English-proficiency testing (2) prior international experience or authentic cross-cultural interactions (both domestic and abroad) (3) connection of purpose, meaning, and goal-directed behavior with the study abroad experience (4) greater tendency to see study abroad barriers as surmountable (5) willingness to delay job hunting activity and less predisposition to lifetime employment and (6) a significantly greater degree of international posture (p. 72). Students in their study also identified several barriers or deterrents to studying abroad, most notably financial concerns, low L2 ability, a troublesome application process, insufficient grades, and delayed graduation (p. 73). In a more recent study, Burden (2020) determined that a lack of confidence and anxiety were major impediments to students studying abroad. It has been said that the structure of Japanese society and its lack of mental health support can make overcoming these last two hurdles particularly challenging (Sato, 2012).

Ikemoto (2013) identified several distinct factors indicating a decline in interest in study abroad (although this downward trend would subsequently reverse) by examining data from students, educators, government agencies, and news websites. These factors included financial reasons, English language ability, lack of interest in foreign culture/language, image of foreign countries, and job-hunting schedule clashes (Ikemoto, 2013). Financial barriers to studying abroad were also noted in Grimes-MacLellan (2017), while Fukuzawa (2016) emphasized English language proficiency as a significant obstacle for Japanese students.

One study carried out during the pandemic canvassed students directly. Nakagawa (2023) collected data from students in 2021 and 2022 about why they were choosing not to study abroad, highlighting four main factors. These were 1) Perceived foreign risk and inconvenience, 2) Information and competency barriers 3) Family related concerns, and 4) Academic and career concerns (p. 73-74).

While the studies mentioned above highlight a substantial body of research on why students choose to study abroad or not, there is still limited investigation into this issue from the perspective of university study abroad administrators. One notable exception is a paper written during the pandemic by Porter and Porter (2020) in which administrators identified several different deterrents to study abroad for Japanese students. These included financial limitations, university scheduling, Japanese students' 'inwardness', and issues relating to English ability or confidence. Administrators in the study also suggested that other factors such as cultural patterns, social conformity, and parent-child dependency could have a bearing on whether or not students decide to study abroad (Porter & Porter, 2020).

2.2. Administration and Recruitment for Study Abroad Programs

While several studies address the challenges related to inbound study abroad administration, particularly in promoting institutions to prospective international students (McFadden et al., 2015; Ozturgut, 2013), there is very little research on the challenges of administering outbound study abroad programs and recruiting students to take part in them (Sachau et al., 2010; Allen, 2023). The limited research that does exist often forms part of broader studies on study abroad. Some of these broader studies are discussed subsequently.

In a study based in Japan, Asaoka and Yano (2009) discussed the role that university staff (note that this includes regular academic staff as well as administrators) need to play in recruiting students for outbound study abroad. In their study, the researchers suggested that "it is very important for university staff to recognize the merits of 'study abroad' and communicate this to students." (p. 186). At the same time, they argued that "universities are not providing students with enough information regarding study abroad [and] student's (sic) availability is not considered even when "study abroad" information is offered to students" (p. 184). In their 2017 study, Medora and Roy, two faculty members at an American university, responsible for administering an outbound study abroad program, described the recruitment aspect of study abroad as "the most challenging and oftentimes frustrating component of the program" (p. 4).

There is a limited amount of literature that explores the way in which study abroad programs are promoted. In an early study about exchange-based study abroad, Doyle et al. (2010) discussed the general importance of publishing

information about study abroad programs, arguing that it can be deployed to overcome barriers to studying abroad relatively easily during the recruitment stage. In another paper, Hackler (2023) argued that study abroad promotional materials should emphasize "cultural competence generation" (p. 100) and that materials should align with the university's goals. In defining cultural competence, Hackler noted a close resemblance to intercultural competence, citing Friesenhahn's definition of the latter as "the personal ability needed to communicate and work efficiently in intercultural everyday and business situations with members of different cultural groups or in a foreign cultural environment" (Friesenhahn, 2001, p. 65, as cited in Hackler, 2023). This suggests that study abroad promotional materials should emphasize the development of intercultural competence. This does not mean only exposure to culture, but also the integration of cultural awareness, communication skills, and self-reflection, all of which are needed to navigate diverse environments effectively.

Boulden (2022), in a study of Black undergraduate students at predominantly White U.S. universities, emphasized the importance of students seeing peers and others with similar identities represented in study abroad marketing. While the cultural context differs, the idea that peer influence plays a key role in shaping engagement with study abroad is broadly applicable, including in Japan, where senior students often informally mentor or influence their juniors. Boulden also stated that "students reported increased engagement with the recruitment process in the instances when they were actively recruited by friends or faculty" (p. 230). In other words, it is not only administrators who can create demand and enthusiasm for study abroad but also the student population itself.

2.3. Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

Most of the studies cited in the literature review considered the administration of study abroad somewhat tangentially or approached it from the perspective of students as opposed to administrative staff. This is perhaps understandable given that students are ultimately the participants in study abroad and the individuals upon whom study abroad is likely to have the biggest effect. Overall, however, there seems to be a real lack of research into the specific and specialized task that is the administration of study abroad, despite the wealth of experience and expertise that study abroad administrators can

share. This small case study aimed to address the research gap by interviewing study abroad administrators directly, considering their unique perspectives on the challenges of recruitment and administration in study abroad programs. By bringing some of these perspectives to light, the study sought to explore how universities might better understand the factors that influence student participation in study abroad, support administrative staff in addressing recruitment challenges, and strengthen future outreach strategies both in times of disruption and under normal circumstances. In doing so, it attempted to answer the following three research questions:

1. According to the administrators, what were the key factors that led to a fall in student participation in study abroad programs during the pandemic and in its aftermath at their university?

2. What specific challenges were the administrators facing in recruiting students for study abroad programs during the pandemic and in its aftermath?

3. What measures are administrators adopting to increase student participation in study abroad, and how do they perceive the effectiveness of these measures?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The aim of this project was to better understand the experiences of those responsible for the administration of study abroad programs. A case study was determined to be the most effective method through which to achieve this aim. Gerring (2004) notes that a case study is "an in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon) where the scholar's aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena" (p. 341). Case studies are usually qualitative, have a small number of participants or subjects, and tend to be ethnographic, or involve participant observation (Yin, 2009). As a result, a case study approach was chosen to investigate university administrators' perceptions about study abroad facilitation.

3.2. Institutional Context

The study was conducted at a private university in Osaka Prefecture, Japan. The university has approximately 6,000 undergraduate students enrolled across multiple faculties including business administration, sociology, law, economics, and international studies. The university has a strong international orientation and maintains partnerships with a large number of overseas institutions, supporting both outbound and inbound study abroad. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university offered a wide range of study abroad opportunities including semester-long programs, exchange programs, short-term language programs and faculty-led programs.

3.3. Participants

The participants were three Japanese administrators, Akiko, Chikako, and Hina (all pseudonyms), all of whom belonged to the university's International Center at the time of the study. Participant sampling was purposive in that the participants were undertaking work that was directly relevant to the research questions being investigated. Sampling was also convenient since the participants were working at my university and were willing to participate in the study (see Positionality below).

Akiko had been working in the center since 2020, right at the start of the global pandemic. She was responsible for administering short-term programs and study tours of less than a month in duration. Chikako had been working in the center for almost ten years and was responsible for both short term programs and semester-long programs in non-English speaking countries. Hina had also been working in the center for around ten years, although she had previously undertaken similar work at other universities and so had the most experience of the three. Hina was responsible for long term programs of a minimum of one semester, and the university's outbound exchange program. All three were wholly administrative (as opposed to academic) staff and had no teaching responsibilities.

While this study focused on three participants, they were the main individuals responsible for outbound study abroad programs. Their roles placed them in a position to speak directly to the study's research questions, and the narrow scope allowed for in-depth, context-rich insights rather than broad generalizations.

3.4. Positionality

According to Berger (2015), it is important to consider one's 'social position', 'personal experiences', and 'political and professional beliefs' when conducting qualitative research (p. 1). Holmes (2020) argues that it is necessary to reflect upon the position that one is adopting within a research study and how that may relate to other participants.

Although I am now a faculty member at the university in which this research is situated, I previously worked in the International Center where the three research participants are based. I have worked closely with all three participants in the past, including on the administration of study abroad. At the time of the first interview, I was still working in the International Center and was a direct colleague of the first participant. I transitioned to a faculty role before conducting the remaining interviews, though I remained in contact with the other two participants as former colleagues. In this study, I have neither directly answered research questions nor provided additional details to embellish the participants' answers, although it is likely that our previous shared work together has shaped my perception of their responses to an extent. Particularly when it comes to the data analysis, I am able to contextualize their responses as I was working in the same place at the same time.

3.5. Data Collection

To collect data within this case study, three one-on-one semi-structured interviews lasting between 22 and 40 minutes were conducted. All were conducted in person and were audio recorded. Naz et al. (2022) state that one of the benefits of semi-structured interviews is that they allow interviewers to "probe deeper…for additional answers and clarification" (p. 45). The interview process from conceptualization to analysis broadly followed the six stages set out in Rabionet's (2011) paper on designing and conducting semi-structured interviews. Questions were mostly asked in English, although clarification was occasionally provided in Japanese. Participants were allowed to use both English and Japanese in answering questions.

The interview questions were divided into five sections (see Figure 1) each designed to elicit information in pursuit of answers to the three research questions. The first section aimed to contextualize the participants' experience

and establish the types of programs they were responsible for. The second was descriptive, asking them to describe changes that they had observed in student participation, with the third section asking them to suggest reasons why these changes may have occurred. Section four asked participants to identify the specific challenges they had faced in their day-to-day work, while the last section focused on changes to student recruitment that they had enacted over the period of the study.

FIGURE (1)
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions
Section 1
1. When did you start administering study abroad programs? 2. What programs do you administer? 3. What are your main roles/responsibilities in the work that you do?
Section 2 – Study Abroad Participation
1. What changes/patterns have you seen in students studying abroad at your university? 2. Are there any types of programs that are becoming less popular? 3. Are there any types of programs that are becoming more popular? 4. Do you think there are particular groups/types of students who are more/less likely to study abroad? (considering the period 2020-2023 specifically) 5. Have any programs been added or deleted from the study abroad offering since 2020? Why?
Section 3 – Reasons for not studying abroad
1. What do you think are the main reasons students are choosing not to study abroad? 2. Do you think these have changed since 2020? 3. How confident are you that you understand the reasons why students are not studying abroad? (Do you have evidence to support your view?)
Section 4 – Challenges in recruiting students
1. How do you usually recruit students for study abroad? 2. What have been the major challenges for you in recruiting students between 2020 and 2023? 3. Do you think your job has become easier/the same/more difficult over that period?
Section 5 – Changes to student recruitment
1. What changes related to the way that administrators recruit students for study abroad have happened at your university since 2020? 2. Have these changes been effective? 3. How much influence do you think administrators can have over how many students study abroad? 4. Do you have any ideas/proposals for other ways to recruit students for study abroad?

3.6. Data Analysis and Presentation

I used thematic analysis to examine the interview transcripts, following the six-stage framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2012). I conducted the coding manually, as the study involved a small number of participants and was carried out independently. Rather than focusing on frequency or duplication of specific words or phrases, I identified themes based on recurring patterns of meaning or issues that were raised as significant by the participants. Initial codes were generated through repeated readings of the transcripts and noted manually, before being iteratively grouped into candidate themes based on conceptual similarity and relevance to the research questions. While not every theme was discussed by all three participants, I selected themes that were salient across interviews or those that I felt were particularly relevant to the research questions. In some cases, participants' own words were also used as in vivo codes during the analysis stage, helping to retain the language and perspective of the participants in theme development. This interpretive approach aligns with case study methodology, which emphasizes depth, context, and meaning over generalizability (Yin, 2009).

My experience working in the same institutional context as the participants also informed my interpretation of the data and helped me understand the significance of certain responses. In presenting the data, direct quotations from participants have been widely used. Adams (2015) argues that doing so allows for themes in different answers to be consolidated and for the researcher to "make [the] issue vivid and explain it in more detail" (p. 504). To enhance analytical transparency and reduce potential bias, I also made use of analytic memos throughout the process to track theme development and reflexively question my assumptions. While formal member checking was not conducted, repeated readings of transcripts over time, with intervals allowing for thought and reflection, helped to support the consistency of the analysis in this small-scale study.

1. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis and discussion below are presented in three sections, each in consideration of the three research questions. Themes identified in the thematic analysis of interview responses are outlined under the research question to which they most closely correspond.

4.1. RQ1: According to the administrators, what were the key factors that led to a fall in student participation in study abroad programs during the pandemic and in its aftermath at their university?

The administrators indicated that overseas study abroad was all but cancelled during 2020 and 2021 at their university. They also said that considerably fewer students studied abroad in the aftermath of the pandemic in 2022 and 2023. Akiko stated that, even in 2023, the number of students studying abroad was only at about half of pre-pandemic levels, and that almost all programs had seen a decrease. Hina and Chikako both stated that short term programs had been particularly affected, with Chikako adding that long-term exchange programs had been more resilient. These recollections are consistent with the data showing declining study abroad participation across the rest of Japan over the same period (ICEF Monitor, 2023).

Based on the participants' responses, five key factors were identified as contributing to a fall in study abroad participation. These were travel restrictions and cancelled programs, cost, fear, a lack of previous study abroad experience, and the lack of senpai.

4.1.1. Travel Restrictions and Cancelled Programs

During the period from 2020 to 2021, travel restrictions and cancelled programs meant that all recruitment processes for short-term programs (i.e. those of a duration of four weeks or less) were cancelled, which meant that no new students were able to study abroad on these programs. This left very little for short term program administrators to do.

Long term study abroad (i.e. programs of more than four weeks although typically one or two-semester programs) recruitment was still carried out during this period, but students who did apply were unable to go, as programs were cancelled by receiving institutions or because of travel restrictions. Hina said, "[for longer period programs], we recruited students, but we couldn't send them…we could predict we couldn't send them abroad, but we recruited students anyway, so we feel some guilty (sic) for them." Some long-term study abroad students who were already overseas also had to come back to Japan.

4.1.2. Cost

All three participants cited the overall increased cost of programs as the main reason students were choosing not to study abroad. Chikako highlighted the university's Canada program as an example: "Before COVID it was like 300,000-400,000 [Japanese yen] but now the Canada program is 900,000. I think that's [the main reason students are not studying abroad]."

Akiko was responsible for putting together quotations for study abroad programs and so was able to explain in detail how costs were rising,

> Surcharges for the air fares are really, really high compared to before. Everything is a lot more expensive now. For example, program fees, and food overseas. And [the] Japanese yen is weak so tuition fees and living fees are really expensive.

For shorter programs, flights make up a considerable portion of the overall cost and so any increase in airfares can quickly lead to the perception that a program is expensive. These findings are consistent with another post-pandemic study, Anthony (2022), which reported that the primary reason for disinterest in study abroad among Japanese students was cost.

In the post-pandemic era, global inflation has risen, and the yen remains weak against other major currencies. While some pandemic-related cost increases may revert over time, it seems unlikely that study abroad costs will return to pre-pandemic levels, which could negatively impact demand for these programs.

4.1.3. Fear

The administrators suggested that fear was another reason why students were opting not to study abroad. Hina commented that students were afraid of challenging themselves and reluctant to go to places they did not already know about. She suggested this may be partly due to the effects of the pandemic, noting that students seemed more hesitant not only about study abroad but about travel in general. She also remarked that students had access to "too much information from the Internet," a tendency perhaps exacerbated by the amount of time spent online during the pandemic, which she believed contributed to their fear.

Akiko argued that students felt scared about going overseas even in 2022 and 2023 because of a feeling that "COVID is everywhere", adding, "They are

really scared of going to (sic) overseas and catching COVID, because they can't really speak English, so they don't know what to do [if they catch COVID]".

While fear of catching COVID as a disincentive to study abroad will undoubtedly diminish over time, other forms of fear may prove more enduring. Hina noted that some students seemed afraid of challenging themselves or stepping into the unknown. These are attitudes that may have been intensified by the pandemic but are not uniquely bound to it. Equally, if Hina's contention is correct that students are becoming afraid to go overseas because of negative information they see online, then the easing of the pandemic is unlikely to address these deeper anxieties. In this sense, the decline of COVID may actually do little to assuage broader fears about going abroad.

4.1.4. Lack of Previous Study Abroad Experience

A lack of experience, leading to reticence to study abroad, was a factor that all the administrators referred to in the interviews. Akiko explained that many high schools had had to cancel their study abroad programs because of the pandemic and that many new university entrants had never been abroad as a result. She intimated that, for many students, a junior or senior high school trip would have been their only overseas experience, so the cancellation of these trips had a big effect.

> The students who went to study abroad, or generally, before COVID…before the pandemic…a lot of [them] had already experienced going overseas so they don't have a hesitance to go overseas and…learn other culture stuff. They've experienced it before so the distance between them and overseas is a lot closer. But after the pandemic [students] are really scared of going to (sic) overseas because a lot of [them] have never even been on a plane.

Students who are unable to study abroad during high school may later lack the confidence to apply for university study abroad programs. The importance of high school study abroad experiences in Japan is discussed further in Metzler (2023).

4.1.5. Lack of Senpai

In Japan, peer influence is often shaped by the senpai–kohai relationship, a culturally significant hierarchy in which younger students (kohai) look up to older, more experienced peers (senpai) for guidance and encouragement

(Sugimoto, 2020; Sekiguchi & Ikeda, 2025; Davies & Ikeno, 2011). Senpai are typically seen as role models whose opinions carry weight and whose experiences are often emulated. These views align with the findings of Porter and Porter (2020), who identified "Positive Peer Pressure" (p. 62) from experienced study abroad participants as a key factor influencing participation among inexperienced students. Without a strong community of senpai returning from study abroad to visibly share their experiences and promote the benefits, demand for study abroad may be suppressed, as kohai lack the social proof and personal encouragement that would normally help overcome hesitation.

Chikako clarified the role she felt that senpai play in recruiting other university students, especially kohai, to study abroad. She noted how the lack of study abroad experience among current senpai impacted others' decisions:

> Because the students' senpai didn't have experience of studying abroad, there were no experience-based recommendations from [them]… the relationship between senpai and kohai disappeared so there was no information exchange. Before the pandemic, when lots of senpai took part in study abroad [and could share their experiences], when they told kohai that the programs were good, kohai would say 'oh, I want to try that too.'

Akiko agreed that senpai play a significant role in generating interest in study abroad, saying, "It's a lot better to get information from senpai rather than us [administrators]."

4.2. RQ2: What specific challenges were the administrators facing in recruiting students for study abroad programs during the pandemic and in its aftermath?

Based on the testimony of the administrators, it was evident that study abroad recruitment during the pandemic and its aftermath was especially challenging. During the interviews, three major themes were identified as having a significant impact on the administrators' work – setsumeikai ('information sessions'), information overload, and a lack of two-way communication between administrators and students.

4.2.1. Information Sessions (Setsumeikai)

In Japanese universities, one of the principal methods of sharing information about programs, events, and courses is through formal information sessions known as setsumeikai. These sessions usually involve a structured slide show presentation, followed by a short opportunity for questions. They are typically characterized by a top-down communication style and a high degree of formality, with students rarely speaking unless invited. Setsumeikai are a culturally embedded part of Japanese university life and are often a key touchpoint in decision-making for students, especially regarding study abroad.

All three administrators emphasized the importance of these sessions as a core part of the student recruitment process. Before the pandemic, they were held in person but moved entirely online during the pandemic, a shift that administrators found particularly difficult to manage.

> Face-to-face [sessions] are easy – students are just right there, so you can see them, and if they have any questions, we can see their face and… directly ask. But online is really difficult because students all turn off their cameras, so we couldn't see their faces or reactions — we didn't even know if they were in front of their computers. There is no communication. It's like one-way communication only. We never get any reaction from students. (Akiko)

Hina also highlighted what she saw as a key difference in the types of students who attended online versus in-person sessions. According to her, most of the students attending online had already made the decision to study abroad and were simply seeking logistical information such as application deadlines, procedures, paperwork, etc. In contrast, students attending in person were often undecided or simply curious, using the session to explore the idea of study abroad. This would suggest that online information sessions may be less effective in attracting students who are still unsure about participating.

As students returned to campus in 2021, the university began offering hybrid sessions that combined in-person and online participation. Participants found this compromise difficult to facilitate, saying "it's really (emphasis added) hard to do online and face-to-face at the same time… I don't know if we could give the right message to students who do the session online [when we carry out hybrid sessions]."

Given their cultural significance and logistical utility, information sessions will almost certainly remain an important means of communicating study abroad opportunities in the Japanese university context. Equally, now that universities are accustomed to delivering information sessions online, it is likely that online sessions in some form will continue. However, while online formats may offer greater convenience and accessibility, the administrators in this study perceived reduced engagement, particularly from students who had not yet committed to going abroad. Hybrid formats also presented new challenges in maintaining consistent quality and connection with both in-person and remote audiences.

4.2.2. Information Overload

Information about study abroad opportunities was disseminated to students via various channels. During the pandemic, the most prevalent of these were the student portal, information sessions, email, and the university website. When students returned to campus, posters were also used, and some students would visit the International Center directly for advice.

All the administrators expressed a view that students were overloaded with information, particularly during the pandemic period, and that this was a major challenge. Akiko claimed emphatically that information overload, especially via the student portal, was a major barrier to recruitment.

> Students are getting so (emphasis added) much information via [the student portal] …a lot of students don't actually check [it]…they get so much information from each department, career center, student support center… [Information about study abroad] is really hard to find for them because they have so many notifications from the university…a lot of times it happens that students come into our office after we [have] closed applications. They are like 'oh, I didn't really check anything', so it's kind of sad.

During the pandemic, the closure of university campuses led to increased reliance on remote communication channels such as email and student portals. The administrators interviewed in this study commented on a sense of "information overload" among students, suggesting that the volume and impersonal nature of these communications reduced engagement with study abroad materials, particularly for undecided students. Other studies examining digital fatigue and reduced message salience in communication

strategies both within universities (Sarangal & Nargotra, 2022) and more generally (Bawden & Robinson, 2020) have drawn similar conclusions.

4.2.3. A lack of Two-way Communication between Administrators and Students

Administrators also described difficulties with two-way communication during the pandemic. Referring to the university student portal, Akiko stated, "I don't think [the student portal] really works that well to send messages to students…it's one-way [communication]…we couldn't really know the number of students who opened up our post."

While these issues were particularly pertinent during the pandemic period, achieving two-way communication appeared to remain a problem even as students returned to campus. It was suggested that students lacked awareness about the International Center and its role in facilitating study abroad, which made direct communication with them difficult. Akiko said, "[students] don't even know what we do. They don't have knowledge of what our job is", while Chikako added, "much less (sic) [students] than before [the pandemic are coming to the International Center]. Many students don't know where the International Center is, or what the International Center is".

One explanation for this might be the low amount of time students spent physically on the university campus during the pandemic. During this period, many orientations and campus tours were cancelled, and pandemic-era students were likely to be less aware about university facilities and services, even after they returned to campus. This is consistent with findings from Hanover Research (2024), which noted that the "pandemic shift to remote experiences and reduced student life opportunities" has created a less connected student body. Akiko suggested that the International Center had become intimidating for some students to enter.

> The numbers [of students coming into the office] are not that high because a lot of students are scared of coming into the office…students literally told me about it…they said, 'I'm a little bit scared to go into the room.'

It seems clear that achieving meaningful two-way dialogue with students ought to be a major focus for future study abroad recruitment efforts. This may

require administrators to seek more direct opportunities for engagement and to increase the visibility of International Centers on campus.

4.3. RQ3: What measures are administrators adopting to increase student participation in study abroad, and how do they perceive the effectiveness of these measures?

Administrators identified two main approaches aimed at increasing student participation in study abroad, each clearly informed by the challenges outlined in the second research question. The first involved measures aimed at making the International Center more visible within the university. The second was an attempt to create more direct communication with students. Since these approaches are interconnected, they will be discussed together, after which the administrators' opinion of their effectiveness will be considered. Finally, the administrators' perception of the influence that they have in the process of study abroad recruitment is reported.

4.3.1. More Visibility and More Communication

Administrators discussed the need for the International Center to be more visible on campus in order that more students would know about it and the study abroad programs that it offers. Hina said, "This year, we are carrying out a number of new trials [to try to improve student recruitment]." For example, Hina said that more posters and flyers had been created to be put up around campus alerting students to information sessions or specific study abroad programs. They had tried to make them brighter and more attractive so that they would stand out more to students. Hina said, "This year, we are putting all of our power into recruitment," adding that visibility of the International Center and study abroad programs around campus was a large part of that.

Another change was that the administrators set up an International Center table, termed a soudan buusu ('consultation booth'), outside of their building during the first week of the new academic year. Akiko (interviewed before the booth/table was used) said that its purpose was to let new first-year students know about the International Center and to start building two-way dialogue with them,

> From next month, we'll try putting our table outside the building… when new students come in April for ID cards and paperwork. It's not really

> recruiting, but a chance to give information about the programs… we try to talk to students walking past.

A further initiative was that the center started carrying out interviews with new first year students to ask them about their plans for their four years at university. Although these interviews were not specifically focused on study abroad, study abroad was frequently discussed with students, alongside wider discussion about academic matters and future career plans. The goal of these interviews was to encourage students to be more conscientious and thoughtful about their time at university, and to publicize the various programs and opportunities available to them.

A final initiative that was being mooted but had yet to be put into action was for the center to hold more events for students. Some of these were to be loosely themed around internationalization, with foreign movies or movies about other countries being shown, for example. Others would be more closely tied to study abroad with an emphasis on past participants (in other words, senpai) speaking about their experiences studying abroad.

4.3.2. Effectiveness of New Initiatives

Although they had only recently been implemented, the administrators' initiatives coincided with signs of increased engagement. While it is difficult to determine whether this was due to the initiatives themselves or to a broader sense of post-pandemic recovery, Chikako noted a marked rise in student participation in information sessions:

> …we have just finished doing the setsumeikai for this semester and the number of attendees rose…particularly for the short-term programs… [For those] we had three times the number of attendees! Also, the number of people using [the student portal] went up.

A 200% increase in information session attendance numbers would seem to indicate a clear increase in interest in study abroad programs. Chikako singled out the outside table as having been particularly effective in creating interest among students. She said that there were students who attended the information sessions who she had personally spoken to at the consultation table.

The university clearly places significant importance on information sessions as a recruitment tool and therefore an increase in attendance is likely to be viewed as a positive indicator for future study abroad enrollment.

However, it is too early to determine whether the significant increase in the number of students attending information sessions will lead to an equally significant rise in those eventually choosing to study abroad. While increased information session attendance will almost certainly have a positive effect, students' interest is not the only determining factor in whether a student ultimately decides to study abroad.

4.3.3. Perception of Administrators' Influence

All the administrators felt that the work they do is meaningful and can influence students' decisions to study abroad. Although they acknowledged that there were many factors beyond their control, all still felt that their work was valid and played a key role in the decision-making process for students. Akiko said, "students who are afraid to go overseas, we could (sic) still push them…in a good way…we can tell the truth or some positive parts of going overseas…we could (sic) also influence their decision making."

Chikako claimed that the administrators' role in delivering the information sessions was especially important. She said that a good information session could make the difference between a student having an interest in studying abroad or not.

Hina felt that the administrators' biggest contribution was to provide information to students regarding important benefits that they may not otherwise know about. In particular, she highlighted study abroad scholarships and the ability to study abroad for as long as a year and still graduate without taking a leave of absence (especially important in Japan) as examples of information which had previously encouraged reticent students to decide to study abroad.

2. Conclusion and Implications

The pandemic had a considerable impact on study abroad programs at the participants' university. Programs were cancelled, reducing the number of participants in 2020 and 2021 to almost zero. Rising costs, a fear of the unknown, a lack of experience, and difficulties in disseminating information to students made recovery in the aftermath of the pandemic difficult, and study abroad numbers remained low in 2022 and 2023. Some of these changes and the

corresponding decline in student participation lend further support to existing literature identifying such factors as barriers to study abroad engagement.

However, this study also highlighted other considerations that feature less in the existing literature. One of the key takeaways from these interviews was how the pandemic disrupted the usual lines of communication between students and administrators. Without two-way communication, it becomes difficult for administrators to understand student concerns, diagnose problems, or make appropriate adjustments to their outreach, particularly when students are already receiving large volumes of information from across the university. With the exception of Asaoka and Yano's 2009 study, this communicative role that administrators play in recruiting students for study abroad is seldom explicitly discussed in the research literature.

Furthermore, this communication challenge was compounded by the absence of informal peer networks, which seem to play an important role in influencing students to consider going abroad. While this study did not directly measure peer influence, participants' observations suggest that returnees, often viewed as approachable senpai, may provide reassurance and motivation to less experienced students. As such, it is possible that a large and visible population of study abroad returnees may help build momentum for participation over time.

The administrators in this study remained optimistic in the face of these challenges and have taken steps to adapt their practices. They described new initiatives aimed at increasing visibility on campus and engaging more proactively with students. Although these efforts are still recent, early indications such as increased attendance at explanatory sessions suggest they may be having a positive effect, particularly in reviving interest in short-term programs. Whether these signs of recovery will translate into a return to pre-pandemic participation levels is unclear and likely dependent on a broader set of institutional and societal factors.

Nonetheless, several implications emerge from this study that may be of interest to practitioners at similar institutions. Efforts to increase the presence of international centers or study abroad opportunities on campus such as through outreach booths or integration into student orientation may help normalize the idea of studying abroad. Communication strategies that prioritize

clarity, relevance, and two-way interaction may be especially important for reaching students with lower confidence or international experience. Additionally, supporting returnees in sharing their stories, both through formal presentations and informal conversations, could help address student hesitation and fear. Finally, clearer guidance on financial support and alignment between program structures and graduation requirements may help address practical barriers to participation and may make recruitment easier.

Future research could build on this study by examining study abroad recruitment practices across a wider range of Japanese universities, including institutions with differing levels of internationalization and student mobility. Further investigation into the role of peer influence, particularly senpai–kohai relationships and returnee communities, may also help deepen understanding of how students develop interest in overseas study amongst their peers. Additionally, talking directly to students themselves may provide further insight into how communication strategies, confidence, and perceptions of study abroad have evolved in the post-pandemic period.

6. Limitations

This was a small-scale study conducted at a single institution with only three participants. As such, the findings cannot be generalized much beyond this specific context. Additionally, the study focused solely on the perspectives of administrators and did not directly examine students or other viewpoints. The culturally specific nature of the Japanese university context, particularly the role of senpai–kohai relationships, may also limit the transferability of some findings to other settings. Furthermore, the researcher's prior professional relationship with the participants and the use of both Japanese and English during interviews may have influenced interpretation or resulted in subtle shifts in meaning. However, the issues raised by the administrators echo some of the challenges documented elsewhere in the literature and may resonate with study abroad offices at other universities in Japan, particularly those operating in similar institutional and cultural contexts.

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Ethical approval

This study followed established ethical principles for qualitative research. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and a consent form, adapted from Trinity College Dublin templates, which clearly outlined the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, confidentiality, data protection procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All participants gave informed consent prior to their interviews. Responses were anonymized and securely stored in accordance with best practices.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are presented within the article. Further inquiries may be directed to the author.

CRediT author statement

Thomas Legge: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

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