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Japanese Students' Study Abroad Motivation: A Survey of International Programs Personnel at Japanese Universities

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Abstract

This study investigates factors influencing Japanese students' decisions to study abroad, drawing on survey responses from 134 international programs personnel at Japanese universities. It examines key inducements and deterrents, the role of institutional support, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial backing from families, universities, and government scholarships, as well as parents' international experience, emerged as significant inducements. Deterrents included rigid recruitment schedules, parental concerns, and cultural attitudes, though inward-looking tendencies were less influential than previously assumed. The pandemic heightened health and safety concerns but also spurred development of underutilized online study abroad options. Findings highlight disparities tied to institutional funding and prestige, with students at less-resourced universities facing greater barriers. The study underscores the need for equitable resource distribution, adaptive curricula, and enhanced support to promote broader participation and strengthen global competencies among Japanese students.

Abstract in Japanese

本研究は、日本の大学における国際交流担当教職員 134 名を対象とした調査に基づき、日本人学生の留学決定に影響を及ぼす要因を検討した。分析では、(1) 留学の促

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進要因と阻害要因、(2) 大学の留学関連競争的奨学金採択状況の影響、(3) COVID-19 パンデミックの影響に焦点を当てた。分析の結果、家族・大学・政府による奨学金などの経済的支援、および親の国際経験は、留学の主要な促進要因として明らかになった。一方、企業の採用スケジュールの制約、親の懸念、文化的価値などは阻害要因として挙げられたが、日本人学生の内向き志向の影響は従来想定されていたほど大きくはなかった。パンデミックは健康や安全への懸念を高めた一方で、十分に活用されてこなかったオンライン留学オプションの開発を促進した。さらに、大学の資金力や知名度に基づく格差も明らかになり、経済的資源の乏しい大学に在籍する学生ほど、留学機会への障壁が大きいことが示された。本研究は、公平な資源配分、柔軟なカリキュラム設計、そして支援体制の強化の必要性を強調し、日本人学生により広範な留学参加とグローバル能力の向上に資する知見を提供する。

Keywords

COVID-19 impact; Japan; socioeconomic disparities; study abroad motivation; university students

1. Introduction

Study abroad (SA) is widely regarded as an effective mechanism for fostering communication skills, adaptability, and intercultural understanding, competencies that are essential in today's globalized world (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; IIE, 2024a; Yokota, 2016). A global systematic review of 325 peer-reviewed studies on higher-education internationalization published between 2016 and 2021 identified four key pathways for developing intercultural competence: international experiences, language learning, virtual collaboration, and intercultural education (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023). In Japan, this global emphasis led the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to explicitly frame SA as part of its “global human resources” agenda back in 2012, channeling substantial public funds into programs such as Go Global Plus and the Top Global University Project (MEXT, 2012c; Ota, 2021). Yet despite this strong policy support and growing scholarly attention worldwide, Japan's outbound mobility has declined steadily over the past two decades, diverging from OECD trends (OECD, 2015). By contrast, neighboring China and South Korea have each recorded sustained growth in outbound student flows over the same period (IIE, 2024b). This gap between national investment and actual student behavior underscores an urgent need to identify which factors truly drive or deter Japanese undergraduates from studying abroad.

To address this gap, we apply Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that human development emerges through dynamic interactions across multiple environmental layers, encompassing both proximal and distal influences. This perspective also incorporates the chronosystem, enabling us to account for the temporal dimension—how critical events, such as societal disruptions or institutional changes, affect students' experiences and decision-making processes over time.

Guided by this framework, we sought to identify personal, institutional, and societal factors that encourage or deter outbound mobility by surveying International Programs Personnel (IPP) at Japanese universities. IPP advise students directly and administer support structures—making their perspectives especially valuable for translating academic insights into policy- and practice-oriented recommendations. By centering these professional voices, our study explores the barriers and enablers of SA in the Japanese context.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Trends in Japanese SA participation

Although Japanese universities and government officials have stressed the cultivation of globally minded human resources (MEXT, 2012c), outbound SA participation has continued to lag (OECD, 2015; Ota, 2021). Worldwide, the number of mobile tertiary students more than doubled between 2007 and 2020, reaching 6.4 million (IIE, 2022), yet only about 1 percent of Japanese tertiary students go abroad—half the OECD average of 2% (OECD, 2015). A particularly visible manifestation of this pattern is the sharp drop in Japanese enrolment in U.S. programs, which have historically been Japan's first- or second-most popular destination: numbers fell from 46,872 in 1999 to 13,959 in 2023/24 (IIE, 2024b). We spotlight U.S. statistics because *Open Doors* and other long-running datasets provide consistent longitudinal measures and because trends in the U.S. often serve as an indicator for broader shifts in Japanese outbound mobility.

1.1.2. Japanese Government Responses

In response to this decline, the Japanese government and private sector have developed initiatives to overcome the younger generation's alleged inward tendencies. Three of the recent large government and private sector SA initiatives include the Go Global Plus Japan Project (2012 – 2017), the Inter-University Exchange Project (IUEP) (2009 -current), and the Tobitate Scholarship programs (2014 – current) (MEXT, 2012a-b, 2023a). These initiatives create opportunities for students to SA by providing scholarships and by developing

exchange partnerships that offer less expensive programs for Japanese students in diverse regions/countries around the world, with a particular initial emphasis on Asia (IUEP).

These initiatives were designed to double the number of university students studying abroad by 2020. In addition, in 2014, the Japanese government launched a ten-year 77million dollar initiative to increase the international ranking of a select group of universities—the Top (or “Super”) Global University Project (MEXT, 2023b). These universities were selected to lead efforts to internationalize higher education and increase their international ranking.

For a few years leading up to COVID-19 and partly because of increased government support, the number of Japanese students participating in short-term SA programs appeared to be increasing, according to both the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO, 2024) and the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS, 2023). However, the number of students participating in longer SA programs (at least 6 months) continued to stagnate despite the increased government support (JASSO, 2024).

In the spring of 2023, the Japanese government once again proposed new goals pertaining to SA participation (Osaki, 2023). One of the goals is to increase SA participation from the pre-pandemic number of 222,000 to 500,000 by 2033. The first step to advance this goal was taken in April of 2024. At the same time, the government provided funds to increase financial support for students currently studying abroad by 70%, which impacted 30,000 students (Omoto, 2023). However, it appears that no other concrete initiatives have been launched at this point to achieve this ambitious goal. All of these initiatives have sent a strong message to higher education institutions regarding the importance of internationalization (Edwards & Ashida, 2021; Ota, 2021; Watabe & Ota, 2021).

1.1.3. Previously Identified Factors

Previous articles and studies have identified a variety of factors that influence contemporary Japanese students’ level of participation in SA programs (Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Burden, 2020; Nakagawa, 2023; Ota, 2013, 2014; Porter & Porter, 2020). Some of the most commonly identified roadblocks include financial constraints, asynchrony of academic calendars, English language deficiency, the “inward tendencies” of contemporary students, and the hiring practices of Japanese employers.

Economic Barriers

Among these factors, financial constraints are frequently identified as

the primary roadblock to SA (Burden, 2020; Grimes-MacLellan, 2017; Kuromiya et al., 2016; Yamamoto, 2020). This finding is not surprising given that the decline in SA participation began in 1990, shortly after the bursting of Japan's economic bubble. It is likely that the ongoing stagnation of the Japanese economy, growing disparity between the rich and the poor (Nakamura; 2023), the economic impact of COVID-19, and the recent devaluation of the Japanese yen have all increased the deterrent effects of financial constraints on SA participation.

Calendar Misalignment

The academic calendar of Japanese universities, particularly at the post-secondary level, make it difficult for students to take time off for longer-term SA experiences (Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2015). Japan's academic calendar runs from April to March. The resulting misalignment with the academic calendars of many universities outside Japan complicates the ability to form exchange partnerships with foreign institutions. Although efforts to alter the academic calendar have been made by Tokyo University and other universities, such initiatives have largely been unsuccessful (Japan Today, 2013). So far, only Osaka Metropolitan University has attempted to implement significant changes to align its calendar with that of its international counterparts (Baseel, 2023).

Language Proficiency Concerns

Japan's English language curriculum has been criticized for inadequately preparing students to gain admission to and succeed at foreign institutions (Burden, 2020; Nakagawa, 2023; Pritchard & Maki, 2006). Despite substantial investment in English education, starting from elementary school and continuing through middle and high school, Japanese students' TOEFL scores have remained relatively low compared to other non-English-speaking countries (Education Testing Service, 2019). In 2024, Japan's ranking on the EF Proficiency Index dropped to a new low, from 87th to 92nd among 116 countries where English is a foreign language (Nagata, 2024). A survey of 328 students at public universities in Japan revealed that the second most common reason for not studying abroad was a lack of language ability and confidence (Burden, 2020).

Inward Tendencies

The notion of "inward tendencies" among contemporary Japanese students has also been cited as another factor for low SA participation (Furuichi, 2014; Park, 2016; Porter & Porter, 2020. Yamashita & Watari, 2014). Government

initiatives like the Go Global Plus Japan Project, IUEP, and the Tobitate SA Initiative were introduced partly to address this issue. The term "inward tendencies" suggests that today's students are reluctant to leave the familiarity and safety of Japan. These tendencies are often attributed to a lack of resilience and readiness to face the challenges of living abroad. However, some researchers dismiss Japanese students' "inward tendencies" as a factor, arguing that external factors such as cultural norms, employer recruitment practices, and limited financial resources play a more substantial role in students' reluctance to SA (Burden, 2020; Grimes-MacLellan, 2017; F, 2018; Ota, 2013, 2014).

Another reason for Japanese students' "inward tendencies" may have to do with the students' overall high levels of life satisfaction (Burden, 2020; Benesse Educational Research and Development Center, 2007; Murata & Masaki, 2013). A survey conducted at a top-tier Japanese university found that many students uninterested in studying abroad were satisfied with the quality of education and research offered by their institution (International Center Kyoto University, 2012).

In addition, unlike the past century, when Japan sent students and scholars abroad to "catch up" to advanced countries, Japan is now an advanced nation. Consequently, students may see themselves as already being in a strong position and may think that SA experience will not be perceived as an advantage by potential employers.

Finally, Japan's employer recruitment practices frequently deter students from studying abroad (Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Grimes-MacLellan, 2017; Ota, 2014). Students often cite concerns about missing out on Japan's traditional recruitment window, which is closely aligned with the university academic calendar. Those who delay graduation because they have chosen to study abroad find themselves out of sync with the typical recruitment timeline, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their peers who follow a more conventional academic path.

COVID-19 Impacts

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2019, SA travel was severely curtailed. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (JASSO, 2024), SA numbers in 2020 plummeted by 98.6% compared to 2018. The implementation of expensive international government initiatives was also dramatically impacted by the various COVID-19 containment measures that lasted longer in Japan than in many other developed countries. A number

of articles addressing the impact of COVID-19 on SA have been published over the past few years (Shimmi et al., 2021; Nakagawa, 2023). These articles delve into the experience of students who were studying abroad during the outbreak and the attitudes of students toward SA after COVID-19. They also address questions regarding how universities should adjust SA offerings in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the future role of online SA (Nakagawa, 2023). In regard to online SA, according to a report by JAOS (2023), although offline SA programs are becoming more popular, the number of Japanese students enrolling in online SA programs has dropped sharply, falling from 4,799 in 2022 to 1,568 in 2023, a significant decline from around 10,000 in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the Japanese government's investments in support of SA, many students are still hesitant, and these initiatives have fallen short of their goals in terms of increasing participation in long-term SA programs, although short-term program participation has increased (Ota, 2021). To make matters worse, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a dramatic, if temporary, decline in students going overseas.

1.2. Rationale and Research Objectives

Most of the previous literature that examined Japanese student motivation have largely relied on expert opinions or surveys of current students at particular institutions to examine the factors influencing SA decisions. To the authors' knowledge, no research has explored students' SA decision-making or the impact of COVID-19 on those decisions from the perspective of individuals who work directly with Japanese college students to promote and support SA participation.

The participants in our previous study (Porter & Porter, 2020) noted that economic disparities play an increasingly problematic role in SA participation. Given the long-term stagnation of Japan's economy, the growing gap between rich and poor, the economic impact of COVID, and the recent dramatic devaluation of the yen, the deterrent effect of financial constraints on SA participation is of particular concern. Disparities between students attending the more prestigious schools that receive the bulk of SA funding and schools that do not need to also be investigated.

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the motivational factors influencing Japanese students' decisions to SA, focusing on the perspectives of international programs personnel (IPP) at Japanese universities. Specifically,

this study seeks to (1) analyze the key inducements and deterrents that shape Japanese students' SA decisions; (2) examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Japanese college students' SAS decisions, emphasizing factors such as university budget constraints, safety concerns, and destination preferences; and (3) investigate the influence of institutional status—particularly whether an institution receives competitive Japanese government scholarships (e.g., SGU or IUEP)—on the perceptions of IPP and deterrents to studying abroad.

The participants in the present study work in international offices at universities across Japan where they engage directly with contemporary Japanese students. Given their role in promoting and supporting SA programs, these individuals are positioned to provide valuable insight into the motivational factors influencing SA decisions as well as the impact of government initiatives. Their first-hand experience makes them key informants for understanding the effectiveness of these costly government and privately-funded initiatives in addressing deterrents to SA participation.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through two primary channels: (1) direct outreach to international offices at Japanese universities (e.g., international exchange centers, SA divisions), and (2) postings shared via relevant professional societies, such as the Japan Association for International Student Education (JAISE) and Japan Network for International Education (JAFSA). In the first stage of recruitment, we recruited 50 participants from the first author's extensive contact list. Given that the first author worked at a Japanese university for six years and later at multiple U.S. institutions as an international education professional, he held an insider–outsider positionality in both cultural and institutional contexts. This dual perspective informed both the development of the survey instrument and interpretation of the results. While this helped facilitate recruitment and contextual understanding, we acknowledge the need for caution in generalizing findings to the entire landscape of Japanese higher education.

In the second stage of recruitment, additional participants were recruited through outreach to professional international education organizations in Japan, including the JAISE, the JAFSA and the Summer Institute for International Education, Japan (SIIEJ). Across both recruitment stages, eligibility was limited to IPPs currently employed at Japanese universities with

responsibilities related to SA advising, coordination, policy implementation, and teaching. Qualifications and placement decisions vary by institutional type (e.g., national vs. private universities), size, and mission.

All potential candidates were invited to participate in the study via an email containing a QR code that linked to a SurveyMonkey survey. Of the 240 individuals who began the survey, 106 responses were excluded due to not meeting the inclusion criteria, survey submission errors (e.g., duplicate entries), or substantial missing data (defined as less than 80% completion). Most incomplete submissions occurred toward the end of the survey, likely reflecting the time constraints of Japanese IPP, who often balance administrative duties with teaching and other institutional responsibilities. The study was conducted during the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023.

2.2. Ethical Considerations

Prior to responding to the online survey, all potential participants were informed of the study's purpose, duration, and their right to withdraw at any time and asked to provide their informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants had the option to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable responding to. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with responses being anonymized and securely stored on password-protected servers accessible only to the research team. All of the processes and procedures for this research were reviewed by the [University Name] Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring adherence to all ethical guidelines, and results were reported transparently with acknowledgement of limitations in the methodology.

2.3. Data Collections

Data were collected through an online survey administered via SurveyMonkey. The instrument consisted of 40 items and was designed to take approximately 15–20 minutes to complete. Survey questions about the factors influencing students' decisions to participate in SA were developed based on our previous work (Porter & Porter, 2020), which examined these factors through interviews with SA administrators and was guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological Systems Theory. The survey incorporated seven components—Microsystem (Family, Peer), Mesosystem (University), Exosystem (Employment), Macrosystem (Economics, Culture) (Table 2), and Chronosystem (the COVID-19 pandemic) (Table 3)—along with items related to participant background and institutional context (Table 1). Each component was addressed by four to seven

items.

Additional survey items were developed by the research team based on their collective professional experience and a review of relevant Japanese government initiatives. The first author worked at a Japanese university for six years and later served for over 25 years in advising and administrative roles at public universities in the United States. The second author brings nearly 30 years of faculty experience at both U.S. and Japanese institutions, contributing expertise in international education and cross-cultural teaching. The third author contributed to the refinement of several survey items, drawing on over 35 years of experience in international education across Japan and the U.S., with particular focus on SA programming and institutional collaboration.

Most survey items employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), supplemented by multiple-choice, yes/no, and open-ended questions. A few items—such as those assessing demographic characteristics (e.g., job title, receipt of competitive scholarships) and the impact of COVID-19—used a “select all that apply” format. The COVID-19 section specifically listed possible pandemic-related influences on SA decisions (e.g., health concerns, travel restrictions). These responses were analyzed using frequency counts (Table 3) and were examined separately from the items measuring inducements and deterrents to SA participation.

For the purposes of this study, only items related to inducements and deterrents to SA participation were included in the main analysis, along with one COVID-19 item. In total, 32 items were analyzed: Demographic = 6 items, Family = 4 items, Employment = 4 items, Economics = 6 items, Peer = 3 items, University = 5 items, Culture = 3 items, and COVID-19 = 1 item.

The survey was developed and distributed only in Japanese; although an English version was prepared for potential requests, no such requests were received. Nonetheless, two participants chose to respond in English to open-ended questions in the Japanese survey. Because their responses adhered to the original item structure (primarily multiple-choice and yes/no questions) and were reviewed by bilingual investigators for equivalence, no back-translation or further editing was necessary.

2.4. Data Analysis

Items were selected for analysis based on their relevance to factors assumed to induce or deter SA participation by Japanese students. The initial

analysis focused on calculating mean scores and standard deviations for various factors identified as inducements or deterrents to Japanese students' participation in SA. Respondents rated the influence of these factors (e.g., parental international experience, financial support, and peer influence) on a Likert scale. The mean scores of inducements such as "parents' international experiences" and "students' belief that SA aids career advancement" were calculated to determine their relative impact. Similarly, the mean scores of deterrents such as "asynchrony with company recruitment timing" and "issues with credit recognition after SA" were calculated. These descriptive statistics were then used to rank the significance of each inducement and deterrent, and to evaluate the relative influence of each factor in the students' decision-making process.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Japanese college students' SA decisions was assessed by calculating the mean scores and standard deviations of various factors. These factors included budget, staffing levels, health care concerns, safety concerns, SA program length, shift to online SA, greater selection of less expensive SA destinations in Asia, decreased interest in English speaking countries, etc.

The second part of the analysis employed one-way ANOVA to examine differences in the perception of these inducements and deterrents based on institutional status (the independent variable was whether or not an institution had received a competitive government grant). The dependent variables were the mean scores of factors identified in the descriptive analysis, and the independent variables were the group classifications. For each factor, the significance of the difference between groups was tested. The F-value and *p*-value were used to determine the magnitude and statistical significance of differences at $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

As indicated in Table (1), 45.4% of the respondents were male, and 54.6% were female. The educational backgrounds ranged from 30.7% holding a bachelor's degree, 34.6% with a master's, and 34.6% with a doctoral degree. In terms of professional roles, 54.9% were faculty members, followed by 33.8% staff, 13.6% administrators, 12.8% program coordinators, 9.8% other positions, and 6.8% advisors. Work experience ranged from 0–5 years (24.8%), 6–10 years (30.3%), 11–15 years (21.1%), 16–20 years (12.8%), to over 21 years (22.0%). A significant majority, 81.5%, had personal SA experience, while 18.5% did not.

Regarding external support, 23.5% of respondents worked at an institution that had received a Top (Super) Global University Project government grant, 47.1% at an institution that had received an Inter-University Exchange Project government grant, 47.1% at an institution that had received non-governmental funding, 25.5% at an institution that had received funding from other sources, and 32.2% who were unsure about external funding sources.

TABLE (1)
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	59	45.4
	Female	71	54.6
Education Level	Bachelor	39	30.7
	Master	44	34.6
	Doctoral	44	34.6
Work Title	Faculty	73	54.9
	Staff	45	33.8
	Administrator	18	13.6
	Program Coordinator	16	12.8
	Advisor	9	6.8
	Other	12	9.8
Years of Work	0-5 Years	27	24.8
	6-10 Years	33	30.3
	11-15 Years	23	21.1
	16-20 Years	14	12.8
	21 + Years	24	22.0
Personal SA Experience	Yes	106	81.5
	No	24	18.5
Scholarship Award	Super Global University	28	23.5
	IUEP	56	47.1
	Non-government funding	66	49.6
	Others	30	25.2
	Not sure	38	32.2

Note. The questions regarding "Work Title" and "Scholarship Award" were multiple choice questions. IUEP =The Inter-University Exchange Project government grant

Table (2) shows the mean and standard deviation of scores for questions on factors associated with students' SA decisions organized by category, as

perceived by the participants (i.e., IPP). The questions were then organized based on whether the factor is an inducement or deterrent for SA. Among the questions on factors that induce college students' participation in SA, the following were identified by the respondents as influential based on mean scores: "family financial support for SA" ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 0.48$), "university financial support for SA" ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.79$), and "parents' international experience" ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.84$). Additionally, the impact of employment-related factors was notable, such as "students' belief that SA aids career advancement" ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.85$). Economic support also played a critical role, with "university financial support for SA" ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.90$), "government financial support for SA" ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.90$), and "government scholarships encourage SA participation" ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.98$) being important inducements.

Among the factors identified as deterrents to students' participation in SA, none emerged as more influential than the others. However, the factors with the highest scores included "asynchrony with companies' recruitment timing" ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.06$), "Japanese parents' protective attitudes" ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.91$), and "inward-looking tendencies" ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.99$).

TABLE (2)

FACTORS THAT INDUCEMENTS OR DETERRENCE STUDY ABROAD PARTICIPATION BY JAPANESE STUDENTS

Category	Question	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Induce ment	Deterr ent
Family	Parents' international experiences.	4.32 (0.84)	x	
	Japanese parents' protective attitudes.	3.99 (0.91)		x
	Japanese students' reluctance despite parental encouragement.	3.31 (0.91)		
	Being an only child.	2.33 (0.85)		x
Employment	Asynchrony with company recruitment timing.	4.06 (1.06)		x
	Belief that companies value students with global skills.	4.05 (0.82)	x	
	Students' belief that SA aids career advancement.	4.06 (0.85)	x	
	Students' belief that staying in Japan is better for employment.	2.95 (1.12)		x
Economics	Availability of government scholarships.	4.23 (0.98)	x	
	Students' preference for studying in low-cost countries over English-speaking ones.	3.37 (1.12)		

	Increased opportunities for participation in online SA programs.	3.35 (1.17)	x	
	Government financial support for SA.	4.25 (0.90)	x	
	Family financial support for SA.	4.79 (0.48)	x	
	University financial support for SA.	4.38 (0.79)	x	
Peer	Influence of other students.	3.76 (0.93)	x	
	Impact on club activities.	3.23 (1.02)	x	
	Influence of social media.	3.67 (0.89)	x	
University	Belief that Japanese schools value multicultural perspectives in education.	2.82 (1.04)		
	Quality of foreign language education.	3.52 (1.13)	x	
	University's valuing of multicultural perspectives in education.	3.59 (1.07)	x	
	University support for students' SA.	3.85 (0.97)	x	
	Issues with credit recognition after SA.	3.00 (1.21)		x
Culture	High regard for SA experience in Japan.	3.56 (0.89)	x	
	Inward-looking tendencies of Japanese students.	3.67 (0.99)		x
	Fear of standing out.	3.19 (1.09)		x

Note. The direction of influence (inducement or deterrent) is indicated by the 'x' in the two rightmost columns.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university international offices was assessed using descriptive statistics for key indicators: budget cuts, staffing reductions, medical concerns, and safety concerns. The results showed that “greater online SA support” had the highest mean score ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.50$) indicating the most significant impact, followed by “greater safety concerns” ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 0.50$) and “medical concerns” ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.48$). Conversely, “decreased interest in English-speaking countries” ($M = 1.08$, $SD = 0.27$), “increased opportunities for SA in Asia” ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 0.29$) and “staffing reduction” ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.40$) were not identified as having a strong impact.

One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of an institution receiving competitive government scholarships on the perceptions of IPP regarding students' SA decisions. The results of ANOVA indicated that there was a significant effect of institutions' external funding status on IPP perceptions regarding the impact of the following factors on SA decision: “Japanese parents' protective attitudes” ($F(1, 115) = 4.64$, $p = .033$), “asynchrony with companies' recruitment timing” ($F(1, 115) = 4.64$, $p = .033$), “impact on club activities” ($F(1,$

117) = 4.26, $p = .041$), “belief that Japanese schools value multicultural perspectives in education” ($F(1, 117) = 6.61, p = .001$), “university support of students’ SA” ($F(1, 117) = 7.09, p = .009$), “issues with credit recognition after SA” ($F(1, 115) = 5.64, p = .019$), and “quality of foreign language education” ($F(1, 116) = 4.58, p = .034$). For all of these factors, IPP working at institutions receiving competitive SA scholarships from the government had a stronger tendency to agree that the above factors impacted students’ SA decisions than educators at institutions not receiving such scholarships.

TABLE (3)

IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONS’ EXTERNAL FUNDING STATUS ON INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS PERSONNEL’S PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS’ STUDY ABROAD DECISIONS

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Japanese parents' protective attitudes	3.76	1	3.76	4.64	.033
Asynchrony with company recruitment timing	3.76	1	3.76	4.64	.033
Impact on club activities	4.26	1	4.26	4.26	.041
Belief that Japanese schools value multicultural perspectives in education	6.61	1	6.61	6.61	.001
University support for students' SA	7.09	1	7.09	7.09	.009
Issues with credit recognition after SA	5.64	1	5.64	5.64	.019
Quality of foreign language education	4.58	1	4.58	4.58	.034
Increase in Asia SA under COVID-19	7.33	1	7.33	7.33	.008

Note: SA = Study Abroad; F-ratios are based on 1 and 115 or 117 degrees of freedom.

4. Discussion

This study aims to explore the factors influencing Japanese students' SA decisions, focusing on the perceptions of IPP at Japanese universities. It examines key inducements and deterrents, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SA, and the impact of institutions’ external funding status—whether or not they receive competitive government funding—on SA participation.

According to the data collected in this study, the most influential factors shaping Japanese students' SA decisions include financial support from families and universities as well as the availability of government scholarships. This aligns with previous findings that indicate that economic support is a key motivational factor (Grimes-MacLellan, 2017; Kuromiya, Hashimoto & Kanazawa, 2016). In this study, family finances had the greatest impact of SA participation.

Parental influence, particularly parents' international experience, also plays a significant role. While it is unclear in the present study whether parents with international experience also tend to have higher economic status, previous research has identified a link between international experience and higher socioeconomic status (Porter & Porter, 2020). The participants of that study noted that students with parents with international experience are often wealthier, with this wealth largely stemming from international connections established through government or business activities. As such, these parents may be leveraging their resources to support their children's aspirations to SA. If this is the case, it raises concerns that SA opportunities are disproportionately available to students from wealthier families who have benefited from globalization.

Financial support from universities and the government is essential for Japanese students who wish to SA, as it alleviates financial deterrents that often discourage participation. Joint funding initiatives, such as scholarships and grants, increase accessibility for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, fostering equity in international education opportunities (Yamamoto, 2020). Such financial support allows students to concentrate on academic and cultural experiences rather than part-time work, enhancing the quality of their SA experiences. Furthermore, government-backed programs such as MEXT scholarships have been shown to boost Japan's outbound student mobility and contribute to the development of globally skilled talent.

This study did not identify a single predominant factor deterring Japanese college student from studying abroad. However, among the marginal deterrents identified were "asynchrony with companies' recruitment timing," "Japanese parents' protective attitudes," and "student's inward-looking tendencies."

The impact of Japanese companies' rigid recruitment timelines on students' SA decisions are consistent with findings from previous studies (Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Ota, 2014; Shimanai, 2014). As noted by the respondents in this study, even though students recognize the potential benefits of SA in enhancing their employability, many are hesitant to delay graduation through participation in longer-term SA for fear of jeopardizing future employment opportunities by missing their recruitment window.

Another deterrent to participation noted by our respondents is the protective attitude of Japanese parents. Although there is insufficient data to

establish a correlation, this tendency has most likely increased in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. In addition, the current wars, increasing violence, and uncertainties of the world we live in contrast with the relative peace and safety of Japan may increase Japanese parents' reluctance to send their children abroad. The low birthrate in Japan may also impact this concern since single-child families are more common than in the past, and parents may be more reluctant to send their only child into a more dangerous and uncertain world.

Japanese students' inward tendencies were identified as a marginal deterrent to SA. This finding aligns with previous literature, which presents mixed conclusions regarding the extent to which inwardness influences students' SA decisions (Furuichi, 2014; Grimes-MacLellan, 2017; Ota, 2013, 2014; Porter & Porter, 2020; Yamashita & Watari, 2014). Similarly, our respondents did not perceive "fear of standing out" to be a significant deterrent to students' SA. These findings suggest that the inward tendencies of contemporary students may not be as influential as often portrayed in government discourse and popular media. Future research examining the role of demographic factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and regional background on intergroup differences in inwardness among Japanese students could provide useful insight into this matter.

This study revealed that enhanced online support for SA programs had a significant impact during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japanese universities' international offices. However, according to JAOS (2023), the shift towards online SA programs during the pandemic saw a significant drop-off in 2023, as students increasingly returned to traditional in-person SA programs. While online SA participation has not retained the same popularity that it had during COVID, it does have many advantages over in-person programs that are relevant to the result of this study. Most prominent among these is the cost. Online programs are much less expensive for participants, which is the greatest deterrent to SA participation. They also address parents' concerns regarding safety and health. As technology continues to advance, online SA may provide increasingly interactive and true-to-life opportunities. It could also open up avenues to develop global competencies for students that would never be able to afford in-person SA programs (Inoue, 2021).

Another impact of COVID cited by our respondents has been increased health and safety concerns related to travel. These were noted as significant deterrents to SA participation in this study. Apart from COVID, the increasingly dangerous and uncertain geopolitical circumstances, including two major wars,

have only aggravated these concerns. The contrast between this ‘dangerous outside world’ and Japan’s relative safety presents unique motivational challenges. These challenges are compounded by Japan’s cultural and ethnic homogeneity and historical isolationist tendencies.

Contrary to our expectations, the pandemic did not appear to influence the choice of SA programs among students at universities that have received the bulk of support from recent government initiatives. Even though SA programs in Asian countries are generally less expensive, students at these institutions continue to prefer traditional English-speaking western countries. This preference may be due to the perception that these destinations are more prestigious and offer higher-ranking education and superior opportunities for immersive language learning among native speakers. At the same time, JAOS (2023) reported that SA from Japan to Asia (such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, and Vietnam) hit an all-time high in 2023. According to this report, these countries together now host 16% of Japanese SA students, with the Philippines topping the list at 9%. While the number of students studying in Asia has increased, 75% continue to study in English-speaking countries, with the US continuing to be the most popular destination at 22%. Future studies should investigate the factors driving the continued preference for English-speaking Western countries among Japanese SA students, despite the increasing popularity of cost-effective Asian destinations.

In this study, we found that IPP at institutions receiving competitive government funding for SA were more likely to identify certain factors as influencing Japanese students’ SA decisions than their peers at institutions not receiving such funding. These factors include “Japanese parents’ protective attitudes,” “asynchrony with company recruitment timing,” “interference with club activities,” “belief that Japanese schools emphasize the perspectives and diversity of other cultures,” “university support of students’ SA,” “problems with credit recognition after SA,” and “quality of foreign language education.” This finding suggests that differences in perspectives between institutions are closely tied to institutional characteristics that influence students’ motivation to SA. Universities with specific features—e.g., vibrant club activities, emphasis on diversity and other cultures, strong support systems for SA, clear credit recognition policies for credits earned while studying abroad, and higher-quality foreign language education—appear to create a more supportive environment for SA participation. These characteristics likely shape students’ and IPP perceptions of the feasibility and benefits of SA.

It is reasonable to assume that institutions with greater prestige and resources are better equipped to provide a favorable environment for SA. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted at top Japanese universities that have found that students' intentions to participate in SA are more significantly influenced by internal university factors—such as self-assessment of foreign language proficiency, awareness of interaction with international students, and accumulation of SA experiences—than by external factors like gender, high school background, family income, or hometown characteristics (Kawai et al., 2011). Additionally, the stronger agreement on the deterrent effect of Japanese parents' protective attitudes and company recruitment timing indicates that there is universal recognition that these external societal factors are significant challenges. However, institutions receiving competitive government funding for SA may be more attuned to these deterrents, potentially because they are more actively engaged in addressing the complexities of SA participation. This highlights the importance of institutional support in mitigating both internal and external deterrents to SA.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the data did not fully capture differences in perspective on motivational factors based on the respondents' occupational roles. Future studies could address this limitation by conducting qualitative research, such as interviews with IPP in specific roles (e.g., administrators, advisors, coordinators), to more thoroughly examine inter-role differences. Second, the study focused primarily on pre-departure motivations, without considering how these motivations may evolve during or after the SA experience. Third, the study may not sufficiently account for the influence of additional external factors such as immigration policies and media that could significantly impact students' ability to participate in SA programs. Additionally, while ANOVA was appropriate for identifying group differences in this study, it does not account for potential covariates or interaction effects. Future research may benefit from employing multivariate techniques such as multiple regression or ANCOVA to further explore these relationships and control for additional influencing variables. In addition, future research should consider using larger and more diverse samples, incorporating longitudinal data, and investigating a broader range of external influences.

5. Conclusion

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the motivational factors influencing Japanese students' SA decisions, focusing on the perspectives

of IPP. Our findings indicate that financial support, particularly that provided by families, is the greatest inducement for SA participation. Government and university support are also substantial factors. In addition, this research shows that the recent governmental initiatives to provide financial assistance to select institutions also equips these institutions to provide a more supportive environment for SA programs.

The students at these select institutions continue to primarily participate in programs in traditional Western and English-speaking countries, although the proportion of students participating in less expensive programs in Asian countries is increasing. In addition, the increase in SA participation that has resulted, at least in part, from these government investments, reflects a steep increase in short-term programs rather than the arguably more impactful long-term programs (Kehl & Morris, 2007; Ota, 2021).

A lingering effect of COVID has been an increase in concerns related to health and safety. Parents' concerns regarding health and safety have also increased. Although support for and participation in online programs increased substantially during COVID and shortly thereafter, participation has decreased sharply in the years following the pandemic. The expectation that these online programs would become the "new normal" after COVID and supplant many of the in-person offerings has not materialized. In-person programs continue to be far more popular.

Another surprising finding is regarding the supposed negative impact of student inward tendencies on SA. Our respondents did not consider this factor to be a significant deterrent to SA participation, even though some literature (; Furuichi, 2014; Park, 2016; Porter & Porter, 2020. Yamashita & Watari, 2014), the government, and popular press often point to this factor as a major issue. The results of our study concur with other literature on this topic, which indicate that outward factors such as culture, finances and employment play a greater role in the decline in SA participation than students' so-called inward tendencies (Grimes-MacLellan, 2017; Ota, 2013, 2014).

The findings suggest several key implications for policymakers and university administrators. Although the Japanese government has made strides in providing financial support and has proposed additional initiatives to address this concern, more funding is needed. In addition, these funds should be distributed in a manner that addresses the economic disparities that impact SA participation rather than simply creating competition for funding among

universities. Leaders must also address the broader cultural and structural deterrents related to employment, particularly Japan's rigid recruitment schedule, which will be critical for increasing SA participation. In addition, given the importance of Asian countries to Japan's economic future, the lower cost of SA opportunities in these neighboring countries, and the continuing preference of students for SA programs in more expensive Western countries, the government should distribute funds in a manner that encourages and incentivizes students to take advantage of long-term programs in less expensive destinations.

Simultaneously, universities must take proactive measures to alleviate student concerns by offering more adaptable curricula and support systems. These efforts are crucial for encouraging broader participation in long-term SA programs, which align more closely with the government's goal of cultivating global human resources than short-term programs. In regard to short-term programs, which students are increasingly opting to participate in, studies indicate that these need to be supplemented with pre-departure and post-return intercultural training components before or after SA in order to realistically achieve the stated goal of developing true global human resources (Humphreys & Horai, 2024; Kashiwa, 2025)

Our study's findings on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SA programs suggest that there is potential for growth of initiatives to provide this support online within Japanese institutions. While the decline in online SA since the end of the pandemic is understandable, institutions should still pursue this avenue and explore hybrid models that offer flexible pre-departure and post-return supplementation. These programs can address the limitations of short-term SA while improving socioeconomic accessibility, particularly given the rising costs of long-term programs in English-speaking countries. Leveraging emerging technologies such as AI can further enhance these online experiences, making them more effective and engaging.

Future research should focus on how to improve the impact of short-term programs through the use of on campus and online supplementary instruction designed to enhance and expand on short-term experiences. Research on the societal and cultural impacts of different funding schemes would also be useful for developing schemes that encourage SA participation but do not exacerbate existing socioeconomic disparities.

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Ethical Approval

This study was approved by Texas Tech University, Office of Research and Innovation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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