

Student Mobility to Japan in the Age of COVID-19: A Matter of Degree

Lauren Nakasato* Nobuko Kayashima†

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left no corner of our lives untouched. This exploratory report examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility to Japan, illuminating recent mobility trends and possible driving factors behind these patterns. To contextualize international student mobility to Japan within broader mobility shifts, international and country-specific reports and statistics were analyzed. To investigate possible factors behind these trends, interviews with four university faculty and administrators responsible for international programming and seven international students enrolled in degree programs at Japanese universities during COVID-19 were conducted. The analysis finds that Japan's emphasis on degree-seeking rather than short-term or exchange students has mitigated enrollment drops at Japanese universities in comparison to other popular study abroad destinations. Further, degree-seeking students prioritize safety and degree acquisition over in-country "study abroad experience." The findings suggest that as universities endeavor to define the meaning and purpose of online initiatives in international programming, shifting student perceptions of the value of study abroad should not be overlooked. This has implications for the future role of online learning in international education, a central debate for universities devising internationalization strategies for the post-COVID world.

Keywords: International student mobility, COVID-19, Japan, online learning

* PhD candidate in International Studies at the Waseda University Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Research Assistant at JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development (lauren.nakasato@fuji.waseda.jp)

† Senior Research Advisor for JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development (Kayashima.Nobuko@jica.go.jp)

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1. Worldwide student mobility in the age of COVID-19: a snapshot

Since the World Health Organization declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, tertiary international student mobility, like other realms of education and society, has been drastically disrupted. From campus closures and online courses to admissions, nearly every aspect of study abroad has been impacted, particularly the physical movement of students across borders. By April 2020, over 220 million tertiary students were experiencing disruptions to their education as COVID-19 forced schools to close worldwide (UNESCO 2021). Partial campus closures with limited activities or complete campus shut-downs were the norm in the earlier stages of the pandemic (Marinoni et al. 2020). While campus shutdowns affect all students, those who are or had intended to be internationally mobile have been particularly impacted. In a survey of over 400 stakeholders in higher education institutions (HEIs) from 109 countries, the International Association of Universities (IAU) found that student mobility has been negatively impacted at 89 percent of the HEIs represented (Marinoni et al. 2020). In particular, destination countries popular with international students saw large drops in international student enrollment in 2020. The United States experienced a 16 percent drop in total international enrollment, both physical and online (Baer and Martel 2020) while Canada recorded a 17 percent drop in international student study permits (“Canada’s foreign enrolment” 2021). Australia saw a slightly smaller drop at 5 percent (Australian Government 2020). Yet this has not been the case in every country. Total inbound mobility increased 7 percent in Germany (Institute of International Education, 2021) and 12 percent in the United Kingdom (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021), raising questions about the factors driving mobility flows during the pandemic. Moreover, disparities have been found between types of universities, with one study showing that nearly 60 percent of US doctoral

universities expect application increases while nearly 60 percent of community colleges reported a decline in international applications (Martel and Baer 2021).

Meanwhile, experts are already predicting rebounds in international student enrollments and surges in applications from students who deferred enrollment due to COVID-19 (“New study anticipates” 2020; Ross 2020; Quacquarelli Symonds 2020). Pointing to past disruptions of student mobility such as 9/11 or the Asian currency crisis, some scholars predict a return to pre-pandemic levels of international student mobility similar to past patterns (Mok, Xiong, and Cheung 2021; Choudaha 2020). A recent survey of 414 US higher education institutions revealed that international student applications for the 2021-2022 academic school year increased at 43 percent of the institutions surveyed (Martel and Baer 2021), hinting at a return to business-as-usual.

At the same time, many view the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink the status quo and imagine alternate possibilities for study abroad (Rizvi 2020; Lee 2020). For some, this means systematizing and extending the capabilities of online and distance learning, online study abroad, and collaborative international online learning (COIL) that were rapidly scaled up due to the pandemic (Whalen 2020; OECD 2021; Kanwar and Carr 2020). Online learning has been celebrated for its promise to broaden access to international learning experiences and has been framed as an equalizer in study abroad (Symonds 2020). However, scholars point out stark disparities in IT infrastructure between high-, middle-, and low-income countries (Salmi 2020; World Bank 2020). Even in areas where infrastructure is not an issue, government regulation may restrict the types or proportion of courses that can be offered online (OECD 2021). Regardless of where they stand in these debates, institutions are faced with the challenge of re-thinking the value and meaning of an “international experience” in the context of the COVID/post-COVID world (Schleicher 2020).

2. Tertiary international student mobility to Japan during COVID-19

In Japan, tertiary international student enrollment decreased in 2020, although to a lesser degree than in top destination countries. International student enrollment decreased by 4.9 percent overall in higher education institutions, not including Japanese language, technical, and vocational schools (MEXT 2020b). Enrollment has been impacted even at universities popular with international students. In a November 2020 survey of 49 universities receiving government funding for internationalization as part of the “Top Global University Project,” 32 reported a decrease in the number of international student applicants (MEXT 2020a). Yet a closer look at enrollment data reveals that the decrease has mainly been in short-term, non-degree-seeking international students while the number of degree-seeking students has in fact increased. While this can be explained in part by students who were already pursuing their degree in Japan and continued their study despite the pandemic, this trend does not stand in some other top destination countries. As shown in Table 1 below, when comparing enrollment shifts between degree- and non-degree seeking international students from 2019-2020, Japan has increased enrollment of degree-seeking students while enrollment of non-degree-seeking students has decreased dramatically. This pattern is markedly different from other top destination countries with data available. While non-degree-seeking student numbers decreased overall, the United States and Germany saw a far smaller percent drop in such students. The US, however, saw a sizable drop in degree-seeking students whereas Germany, like Japan, gained degree-seeking students between 2019 and 2020.

Table 1: Country Comparison of Tertiary International Enrollment Shifts by Degree Status
2019-2020

	Degree-seeking (BA, MA, PhD)			Non-degree-seeking ¹		
	2019	2020	% change	2019	2020	% change
United States ²	1,306,869	1,121,98	-14.1%	62,341	58,201	-6.6%
Australia ³	440,667	418,168	-5.1%	48,214	31,963	-33.7%
Japan ⁴	115,154	119,890	+4.1%	25,411	13,683	-49.5%
Germany ⁵	255,478	274,285	+7.4%	26,035	24,959	-4.1%

Note: Table 1 categorizes student enrollment into “degree-seeking” and “non-degree-seeking” as judged by the authors using data from multiple sources as listed below. The authors acknowledge discrepancies in categorization and definitions between the data sets as explained in the following footnotes.

1. Excludes those enrolled in vocational and certificate programs.
2. Degree-seeking students includes students enrolled in associates degree programs.
3. Degree-seeking students includes graduate certificate/diploma students, students taking MA coursework or performing MA research, and students in preliminary/qualifying programs prior to MA/PhD matriculation.
4. Students who are regularly-enrolled are categorized as degree seeking while those other than regularly-enrolled students (auditing students, research students, advanced course students and short-term course students) are categorized as non-degree-seeking.
5. Data only available for Winter 2020 term.

Sources: Computed by authors using data from the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2021); Institute of International Education (2020); Australian Government (2021); Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2020b); German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) & German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW) (2020, 2021).

Examining Japan’s enrollment data in more detail in Table 2 below, we can see that although students enrolled in non-degree-programs decreased by nearly 50 percent between 2019 and 2020, they make up only a small percentage of the overall population of international students, who are overwhelmingly degree-seeking.

Table 2: Change in International Students Enrolled in Japanese HEIs by Program Type
2019-2020

		2019	2020	% change
Undergraduate	Total	87,911	80,409	-8.5%
	Degree-program	67,949 (48%)	70,709 (53%)	+4.0%
	Non-degree-program ¹	19,962 (14%)	9,700 (7%)	-51.4%
Postgraduate	Total	52,654	53,164	+0.9%
	Degree-program	47,205 (34%)	49,181 (37%)	+4.1%
	Non-degree-program	5,449 (4%)	3,983 (3%)	-26.9%
Total		140,565 (100%)	133,573 (100%)	-4.9%

Note: While the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) also publishes detailed data on international student enrollments, MEXT’s annual “School Basic Survey” is based on the enrollment records of each university and does not include data from vocational/technical colleges or junior colleges.

¹ Includes students enrolled in non-degree short-terms courses, credited auditor/auditor students, and research students.

Source: MEXT (2020b).

3. Behind the numbers: voices from the field

To clarify possible driving factors behind these patterns, we conducted interviews with four university faculty and staff responsible for the oversight and management of international programs at three top universities for international students in Tokyo. Two of the schools are private and one is a national university. Interviews were conducted online from June 21-June 24, 2021. According to our private university respondents, nearly all exchange programs were abruptly halted due to the pandemic. In contrast to direct enrollment, exchange programs typically involve a formal arrangement between universities (Memorandum of Agreement, MoA) that specifies the number of students each school will accept. Thus, while suspending these programs has led to a predictable drop in short-term exchange students, an equally predictable rebound in enrollment is likely once the programs resume. While our national university respondents reported similar drops in international exchange students, however, they also saw an increase in degree-seeking students at the graduate level.

Another possible explanation for the relative stability of degree-seeking international student enrollment may be the meaning of the study abroad experience for the students themselves. To understand the decision-making process of international students who decided to study in Japan during COVID-19, we interviewed seven degree-seeking MA and PhD students entering Japanese universities from Fall 2020-Spring 2021. Reflecting national statistics on international student enrollments (JASSO 2021), most students interviewed were from China and all were from the Asia-Pacific region. Three were students in the biological sciences and four in the social sciences. The interviews were conducted online from June 3-June 17, 2021. Though none of the students expressed new interest in studying in Japan as a result of the pandemic, COVID-19 was not a formidable barrier to fulfilling their long-held intention to study in Japan. This suggests a certain degree of stability of Japanese international programs as students were not deterred from their plans. When asked where he would have chosen to study abroad if not Japan, one Chinese student replied: "If I didn't choose Japan ... maybe I will choose China," implying that he may not have studied abroad at all. Though half of the respondents were still unable to enter Japan due to border restrictions at the time of the interview, they began their degree program online and were determined to complete their degree whether they could enter Japan or not. While their preference was to experience studying in Japan in person, the goal of attaining an MA or PhD from a Japanese university took precedence over other aspects of the "study abroad experience." One student explained that while Japan may not be as popular a destination for Chinese students as Western countries such as the UK, Canada, Australia, or the US, many Chinese companies respect degrees from Japanese universities as an image of academic rigor and a focus on one's studies is associated with Japanese higher education.

Further, student interviews suggested that regional proximity may be a salient factor in study abroad destination choice. Many of the students expressed feelings of comfort when

describing Japan's physical and cultural proximity to their home country. One student from China recounted a memory from a short-term abroad program he had joined in Hiroshima prior to his post-graduate study in Japan. He was overcome with nostalgia when he participated in a local festival that reminded him of festivals from his childhood village in China. "That was an experience that stuck in my heart," he said, attributing part of his decision to study in Japan to the cultural proximity he felt. Indeed, some scholars have predicted an acceleration of the existing trend of intra-regional student mobility (Pan 2020; Salmi 2020), particularly in the Asian context as anti-Asian sentiment has been on the rise in some Western countries (Rzymiski and Nowicki 2020; Erasmus Student Network 2020). A student who had earned her BA in New Zealand attributed part of her decision to study in Japan to a concern for safety: "If you are in a country that has some sort of crime and you're worried all day and your parents are worried all day, how are you supposed to learn something there? You can't just focus on your studies." Further, she added, "it's important for my mental health."

Thus, degree-seeking students from Asia who choose to study abroad in Japan emphasize safety, stability, and the value of the degree itself. This may partially explain why Japanese universities have continued to retain and attract students despite moving classes online. By late April 2020, nearly 99 percent of over 800 Japanese colleges and universities (including junior colleges) had decided to implement or were considering the implementation of online courses (MEXT 2020c). Worldwide surveys have shown mixed support for online options in study abroad, with some students unwilling to pay full tuition for online instruction and remaining resolute in their pursuit of an on-campus study abroad experience while others have begun to consider online options as the pandemic drags on (Strods, Berka, and Linney 2020; Svanholm 2020). Chinese students have been less averse to considering online options than their peers in the European Union, India, or North America (Quacquarelli Symonds 2020). Due to the availability of online

courses, international students were able to start, continue, and complete their degrees at Japanese universities through online instruction without having to risk their health or change their plans based on their ability to enter the country. This suggests that online options may have enabled students to pursue their study abroad plans uninhibited.

4. Online learning and the future of study abroad

In this way, degree-seeking international student numbers have remained steady while short-term exchange student numbers are expected to rebound once exchange programs resume, signifying a return to the status quo. Yet when considering the needs of international students as described above, the most profound and lasting effect of the pandemic on student mobility to Japan may be the further development and institutionalization of online learning. Indeed, in our interviews with university management and professors, respondents identified online learning as a central topic of debate in the discussion over the purpose and implementation of international programs post-COVID. On the one hand, online learning has allowed education to proceed largely uninterrupted regardless of student or instructor location and has enabled domestic and international knowledge sharing and collaboration. Yet, according to one respondent, the question for many universities will be how to define the purpose and meaning of online education both domestically and in the global context. Expanding online course offerings will put Japanese universities in direct competition with other universities at the global level, raising concerns such as language barriers and tensions between “traditional” teaching styles and international expectations. Indeed, universities are already considering the value of online learning as a tool for internationalization. In the 2020 survey of 49 Top Global universities mentioned above, the top three barriers to implementing online and on-demand formats were ensuring the quality of online international

education and exchanges, gaining the knowhow to design lessons and develop materials for online instruction, and ensuring the educational benefits are worth the financial and manpower costs (MEXT 2020a).

Global data are also inconclusive about the future of online education. A June 2021 survey of 414 US higher education institutions revealed that 57 percent were in the process of expanding global online learning programs (Martel and Baer 2021). Yet in a worldwide survey of over 19,000 prospective international students, online learning was not a favorable alternative to actual study abroad even during pandemic with 42 percent not at all interested and 40 percent somewhat interested (Quacquarelli Symonds 2020). Further, students are making a gradual return to the classroom. In the same survey of US higher education institutions, 44 percent reported that at least half of all international students attending classes in Spring 2021 were attending in person (Martel and Baer 2021). Likewise in Japan, nearly 98 percent of over 1000 colleges and universities (including junior colleges) are planning to hold at least half of all courses face-to-face for the 2021-2022 school year (MEXT 2021), reflecting the government push for a return to in-person instruction.

Against this backdrop, the value and meaning of study abroad in the Japanese context in the post-COVID era are in flux. Enrollment figures show that there has been minimal impact on degree-seeking international student enrollments due to COVID-19, reflecting student preferences for safety and stability and the value they place on the acquisition of the degree. Further, higher education enrollment is predicted to grow as more students will likely pursue a higher degree rather than enter the job market in the early stages of the global recession (Hillman 2020). Yet while the sudden proliferation of online education may offer students a safe option for obtaining their degree online, it is unclear whether and how online options will be conceptualized and implemented moving forward and if student attitudes toward the study abroad experience will

change as the pandemic progresses.

5. Where to go from here? Pathways forward through research

During this period of reappraisal and redefinition of what it means to study abroad in Japan, there is a need for sound empirical evidence demonstrating student outcomes particular to the study abroad experience. Further, in an era in which online options are readily available, comparative research exploring the efficacy and impact of online internationalization in comparison to traditional study abroad is becoming increasingly urgent. In a 2020 survey of 49 Japanese Top Global universities, nearly 90 percent reported that they want to revise international programs to blend actual overseas study and online instruction with roughly half reporting an intention to emphasize quality, not quantity, of both inbound and outbound study abroad in the post-COVID era (MEXT 2020a). If this indeed becomes the trend in Japan, there will be a heightened focus on strengthening the interconnections between study abroad and internationalization efforts on the home campus. This echoes Whalen's (2020) proposal that education abroad no longer be defined strictly as students crossing national borders but instead that which "promotes the mobility of students' minds" including online learning, online study abroad, and domestic study away. The progression of online education is an opportunity to re-consider the value of study abroad to Japan and the unique philosophy Japan can bring to the global higher education realm.

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