

# Policy Note

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## Impact of Faculty Study Abroad Experiences on Subsequent Academic Activities and the Internationalization of the University

—Findings of the Empirical Research Project on Leading Universities in Southeast Asia—

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### Abstract

- The JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development conducted an empirical study to determine the impacts of faculty members' study abroad experiences on their subsequent academic activities, as well as on the overall development of the universities. The study was conducted in collaboration with ten leading universities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. This policy note summarizes the policy implications of the study results.
- Recommendation 1: The study abroad experience of university faculty members has positive impacts on the overall educational and research activities of universities in developing countries. In particular, the international networks, language skills and international experiences gained by faculty members through study abroad contribute significantly to improving the quality of leading universities in developing countries by promoting the internationalization of universities. It is necessary to fully take into account the role of faculty study abroad experience in the internationalization of higher education.
- Recommendation 2: While faculty study abroad plays a vital role in internationalizing universities, it is also important to encourage domestic study to develop local graduate education. A balance between study abroad and domestic study should be fully considered in policies related to the attainment of advanced degrees by faculty members. Domestic graduate programs should also include opportunities for international academic experience.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official positions of either JICA or the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development.

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- Recommendation 3: The study abroad destinations of university faculty members from developing countries tend to be concentrated around a few countries. However, diversifying the range of destinations not only contributes to the internationalization of universities by building a rich international network but also provides universities with more diverse study abroad experiences and makes the most of the strengths and weaknesses of different destination countries. Since many of the scholarships for university faculty to study abroad for advanced degrees are publicly funded, governments of developing and developed countries, as well as international organizations that provide scholarships, should give due consideration to diversifying study abroad destinations.
- International cooperation and competition are now essential for academic development, even in developing countries. For the development of higher education in developing countries, it is important to provide university faculty members with diverse and rich opportunities to study abroad and to create an environment in which their study abroad experiences can be used effectively while maintaining a balance with the development of domestic graduate programs.

## 1. Empirical Research on the Impact of Faculty Study Abroad in Southeast Asian Universities

The global landscape of international students has witnessed a significant upsurge since the beginning of the 21st century. Over the past two decades, the international student population has grown from approximately 2 million to 6 million (OECD 2021), with their representation in higher education cohorts in developed countries increasing from 4.0% to 8.3% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2023). This increase can be attributed to a number of factors, including the accelerated pace of globalization that has increased the mobility of people; the burgeoning economic development of developing countries augmenting the pool of prospective students worldwide; and concerted efforts to internationalize higher education which have paved the way for the proliferation of study abroad programs globally. Historically, the movement of students from developing to developed countries has often been viewed through a negative lens, characterized as brain drain (Altbach 1981, 2003). However, contemporary discourse has increasingly embraced the notion of brain circulation, recognizing the positive dimensions of information and technology transfer facilitated by the mobility and networking of highly skilled human capital (Lee and Kim 2010; Saxenian 2005). The growing awareness of the benefits of study abroad for development is evidenced by the fact that one of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to expand scholarships for study abroad in developing countries (SDG 4.b).

While the benefits of study abroad for the socio-economic development of developing countries are widely recognized, little attention has been paid to examining the impact of study abroad experiences on the organizations and societies to which returnees belong. Existing studies on higher education and study abroad focus primarily on individual-level outcomes, such as changes in

knowledge, attitudes, values, employment, and income among returnees (Asada 2017; Paige et al. 2009; Teichler 2017; Teichler and Steube 1991). The paucity of research on organizational or societal impacts to date may be due to the challenges inherent in measuring the organizational and societal impacts of study abroad initiatives, given the long time frame required for human capital development effects to manifest, coupled with the diverse employment settings in which study abroad alumni find themselves. As the prevalence of international student mobility increases worldwide and study abroad programs proliferate, exploring their societal impacts becomes increasingly important.

In response to this pressing need, the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development undertook a research project aimed at elucidating the organizational impact of study abroad.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on ten leading universities<sup>2</sup> in four Southeast Asian countries—Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia—that are characterized by remarkable economic and academic progress, the project sought to identify the study abroad experiences of faculty members and assess the resulting impact on their academic endeavors and the holistic development of their respective universities. The research involved a comprehensive questionnaire survey of all faculty members at the selected universities, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with faculty members and higher education officials.<sup>3</sup> This policy note summarizes the policy implications that emerge from the analysis of these empirical data.

## 2. Impact of Study Abroad

The questionnaire survey for this study collected data on the impact of study abroad of faculty members who had studied abroad (hereafter referred to as SA faculty) and the impact of studying at home of those who had only studied domestically (hereafter referred to as SH faculty). Figure 1 shows the differences in impact between the two groups. It shows that the study abroad experience has a positive impact on the faculty member's various subsequent teaching and research activities. The impact of study abroad on faculty members' international activities—such as presentations at international conferences, international research collaborations, invitations to foreign researchers, teaching in foreign languages, and student exchanges with foreign universities—is significant.

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<sup>1</sup> The study focuses on study abroad at the graduate level, which is an essential part of the professional development process for university faculty, because the purpose of the study is to analyze the impact of study abroad on the work of university faculty members. Study abroad at the undergraduate level and short-term study abroad programs of less than one year are excluded from the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> The most representative comprehensive and science and technology universities for each of the four target countries were selected for the survey: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in Malaysia; Universitas Gadjah Mada, Institut Teknologi Bandung in Indonesia; Vietnam National University, Hanoi, University of Science and Technology in Vietnam; Royal University of Phnom Penh, Institute of Technology of Cambodia, Royal University of Agriculture, Royal University of Law and Economics in Cambodia.

<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire survey was completed by 3,288 university faculty members (25% response rate), and interviews were conducted with 137 faculty members and higher education officials.

Figure 1 : Comparison of SA and SH impacts on education and research activities

(1) Difference of faculty members' perception on the impacts of SA or SH

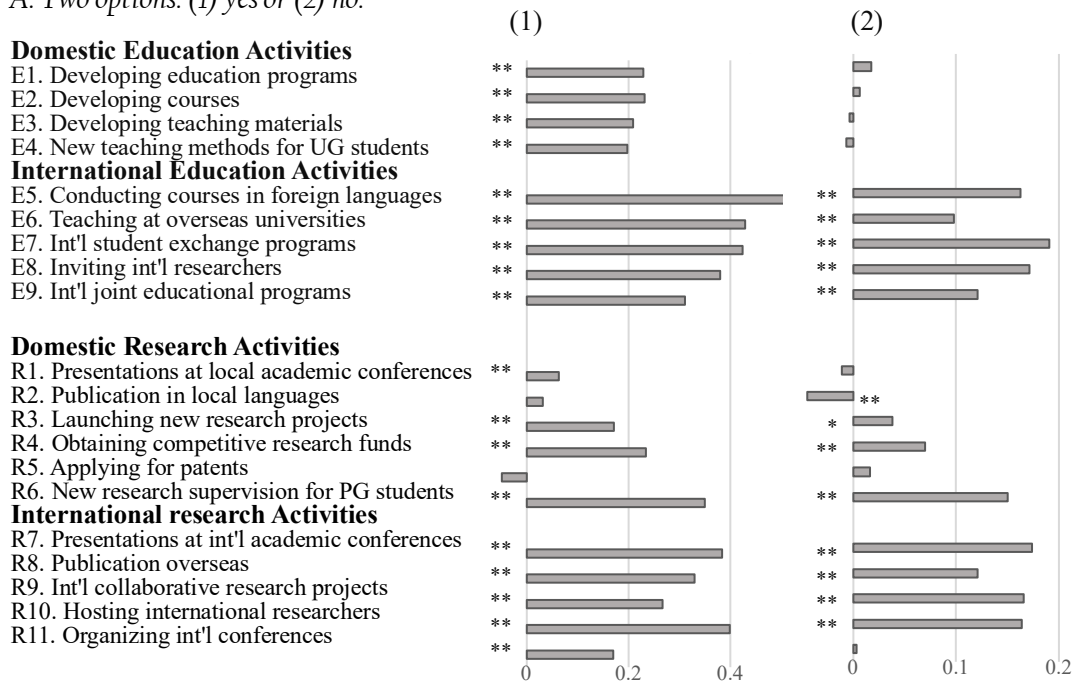
Q: Do you think your study abroad (or study at home) experience enhanced your skills and knowledge in dealing with the following activities?

A: 4-point Likert scale with (1) to a large degree, (2) to some degree, (3) little, and (4) not at all.

(2) Difference of implementation rate of education/research activities between SA and SH

Q: Have you actually conducted the following activities in the past five years?

A: Two options: (1) yes or (2) no.



Note 1: The figures shows the difference in the mean response value between SA group and SH group: (SH group -SA group).

Note 2: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01

Note 3: SA n=2,000 SH n=937

In the interview survey, faculty members frequently mentioned that the international networks they developed through their study abroad experience played a vital role in their subsequent international activities. Strong connections with graduate school advisors, other faculty members, and alumni have contributed to the implementation of collaborative research and the formation of international collaborative educational programs upon their return to their home countries. Foreign language skills, international experience, and confidence gained from studying abroad also play a significant role.

In recent years, higher education in Southeast Asia has experienced rapid expansion, and governments are striving to improve both the quality and quantity of higher education (Altbach 2004; Lee 2006; Welch 2011). With the increasing internationalization of higher education, improving the quality of leading universities is closely related to their internationalization. In developing countries, where the domestic circles of top education and research are not necessarily sizeable, participation in the global academic community—along with cooperation and competition with international partners—is essential for the growth of leading universities. For higher education institutions that

aspire to become world-class research universities, it is essential that the study abroad experience of their faculty members has a positive impact on the international education and research activities of the university.

Although the impact of study abroad on domestic activities was smaller than the impact on international activities in the quantitative analysis of survey results, the interviews indicated that faculty study abroad experiences also produced interesting qualitative changes. For example, a shift from classes in which students participate passively to classes that require proactive participation; a shift from memorization and information transfer-oriented teaching to discussion-based teaching; the creation of more horizontal faculty-student relationships that allow students to speak freely; the improvement of student laboratory and field work; and faculty participation in student laboratory practice. Because many university faculty members in developing countries have had little opportunity for training as educators, the teaching and research supervision they receive at the undergraduate and graduate levels often serves as a model for them when they become faculty members themselves. In this sense, the experience of being exposed to different styles of teaching and research in the host country—and sometimes of participating in the educational activities of the host university as a teaching or laboratory assistant—has a valuable influence on the activities of faculty members when they return home.

Faculty members' study abroad experiences also impact educational and research activities that are systematically undertaken at the departmental or university level, such as program development, joint educational programs with foreign universities, and large-scale international collaborative research. The activities at the departmental or university level depend largely on the experiences and skills of the faculty members who comprise them. Their study abroad experiences go beyond the impact at the individual level and contribute to the development of educational and research programs at the institutional level.

Both the questionnaire and interview surveys revealed many positive impacts of studying abroad but also identified negative effects related to adjustment upon return. Research environment, salary levels, bureaucracy, fraud, and corruption are common challenges in higher education in many developing countries (Altbach 2003; Moon 2023), and faculty members returning from long-term study abroad feel highly stressed by these challenges. Some may also feel marginalized and frustrated because they find it difficult to integrate into the academic community in their home countries and universities and because their prolonged absence from their home countries puts them behind their peers studying locally. From another perspective, however, this is evidence that returning faculty members bring back something different from the culture and values of their home universities after a long period of study abroad. It is desirable that steps be taken to ensure that these valuable study abroad experiences bring positive change to their home universities and academic communities.

## **Recommendation 1**

The study abroad experience of university faculty members has positive impacts on the overall



educational and research activities of universities. In particular, the international networks, language skills, and international experience gained by faculty members through study abroad contribute significantly to improving the quality of leading universities in developing countries by promoting the internationalization of universities. It is necessary to formulate higher education policies that fully take into account the role of faculty study abroad experience in the internationalization of higher education.

### 3. Development of Domestic Higher Education and Study Abroad Impacts

The second important finding of this research is that the impact of studying abroad relative to studying at home decreases with the development of local higher education. The difference in impact between SA and SH faculty generally decreases in the order of Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Figure 2). More specifically, looking at SA faculty alone shows that the impact of studying

Figure 2 : Comparison of SA and SH impacts on education and research activities by country of origin

#### (1) Difference of faculty members' perception on the impacts of SA or SH

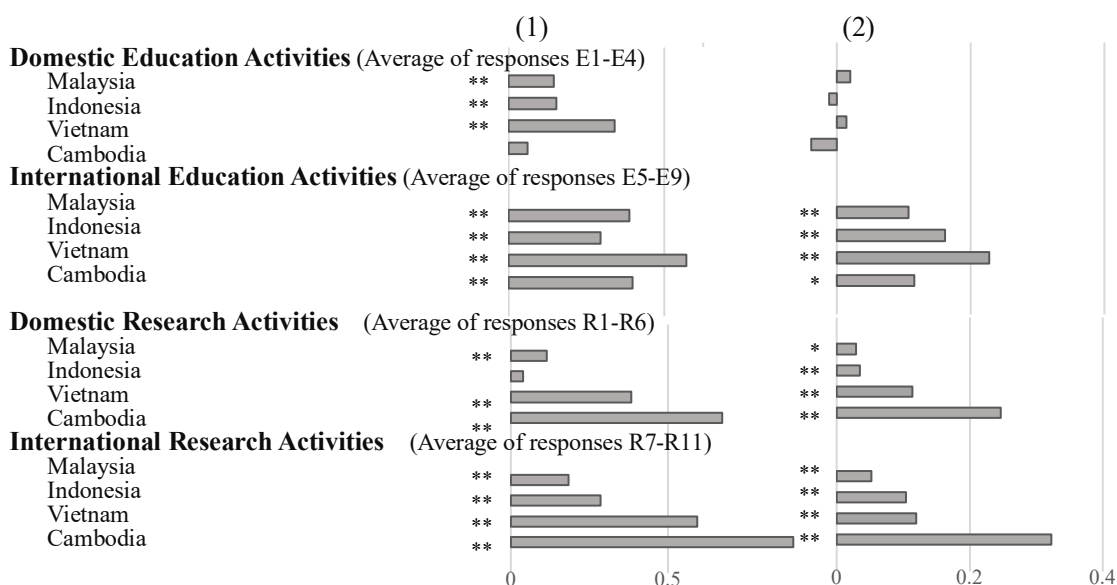
Q: Do you think your study abroad (or study at home) experience enhanced your skills and knowledge in dealing with the following activities?

A: 4-point Likert scale with (1) to a large degree, (2) to some degree, (3) little, and (4) not at all

#### (2) Difference of implementation rate of education/research activities between SA and SH

Q: Have you actually conducted the following activities in the past five years?

A: Two options: (1) yes or (2) no.



Note 1: The figures shows the difference in the mean response value between SA group and SH group by country of origin (SH group -SA group).

Note 2: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01

Note 3: Malaysia SA n=482 SH n=382; Indonesia SA n=1,096 SH n=397; Vietnam SA n=225 SH n=126; Cambodia SA n=187 SH n=26

abroad varies slightly across countries. Looking at SH faculty alone shows that the impact of studying at home varies significantly across countries. This suggests that the difference between the two groups narrows as domestic graduate education develops and improves in quality.

The difference in impact between countries is particularly large for international research activities (Figure 2), and this is confirmed by comparing the number of scholarly publications (Figure 3). Comparing the number of articles and book chapters published in foreign languages between SA and SH faculty, the former is 1.3 times higher than the latter in Malaysia, 1.6 times higher in Indonesia, 2.1 times higher in Vietnam, and 7.0 times higher in Cambodia.

Growth in the number of domestic graduates has been particularly rapid in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam (Figure 4). The number of domestic master's graduates has increased since around 2000 in Indonesia and Malaysia, and since around 2010 in Vietnam, and now exceeds the number of foreign master's graduates. On the other hand, the number of domestic Ph.D. holders has increased, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia, although not to the same extent as for master's degrees. Along with the quantitative development of graduate education, the quality of graduate education is also improving in a direction

Figure3 : Comparison of average number of academic publications between SA and SH faculty members by country of origin (academic articles /book chapters—self-reported)

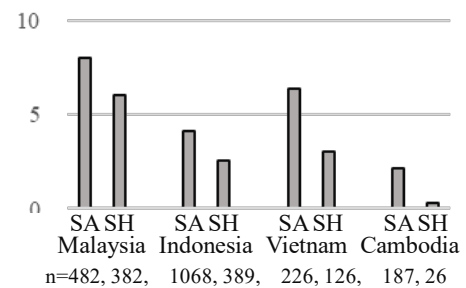
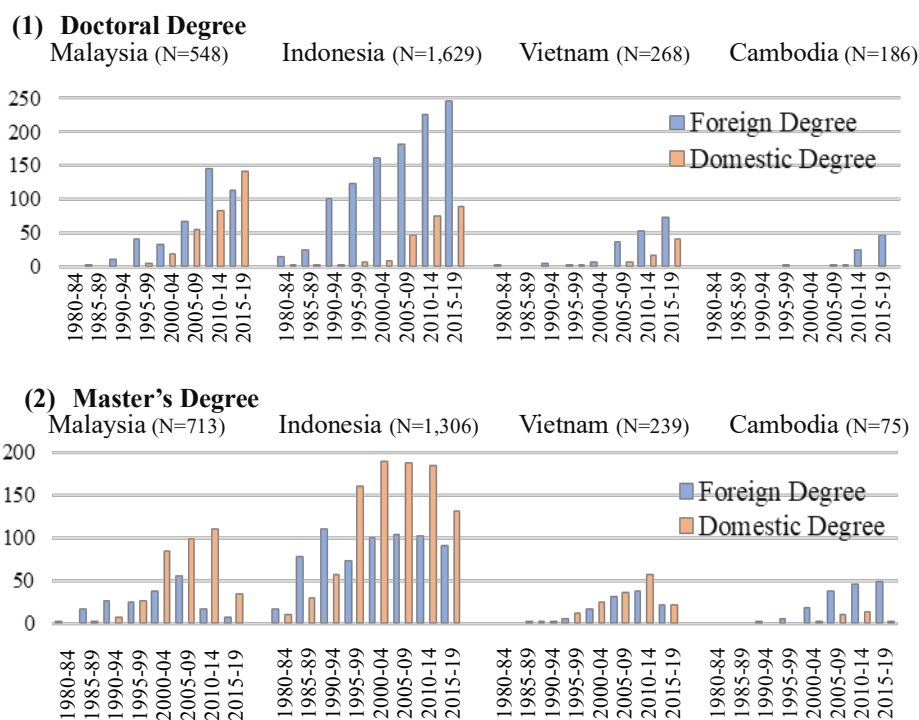


Figure 4 : Changes in Faculty Members' Foreign and Domestic Degree Acquisition



that is replacing the previous trend toward foreign degrees, thus narrowing the gap between the impact of domestic and foreign studies. In Cambodia, the majority of faculty members still hold foreign advanced degrees, but eventually, as in other countries, the number of domestic degree holders will increase as local graduate programs develop.

Developing graduate education is an important step in the growth of the entire national higher education system. This is because graduate programs at leading universities serve as the training ground for university faculty throughout the country, in addition to being the foundation for research activities. The development of graduate education requires not only high-quality faculty and well-developed teaching and research environments but also excellent students. Therefore, in countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, where graduate programs are developing, it will be necessary to encourage local degree attainment by considering fields of specialization and comparing domestic and foreign graduate schools, rather than sending all excellent faculty members to study abroad.

At the same time, it has become increasingly important for all faculty members to have international experience. It is necessary to create a local educational environment that allows students to gain international academic experience, for example, through the development of double degree programs and opportunities to participate in short-term study abroad and international academic conferences.

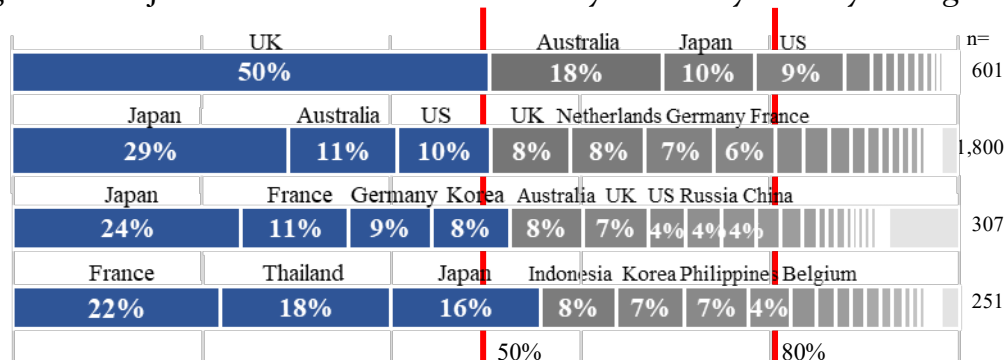
## Recommendation 2

While faculty study abroad plays a vital role in internationalizing universities, it is also important to encourage domestic study to develop local graduate education. A balance between study abroad and domestic study should be fully considered in policies related to the attainment of advanced degrees by faculty members. Domestic graduate programs should also include opportunities for international academic experience.

## 4. Diversity of Destination Countries

The approximately 2,000 SA faculty members for whom data were collected in this research project studied in a relatively small number of destination countries (Figure 5). The largest destination country for Malaysia is the United Kingdom, which accounts for 50 percent of SA faculty; for

Figure 5 : Major destination countries of study abroad by country of origin



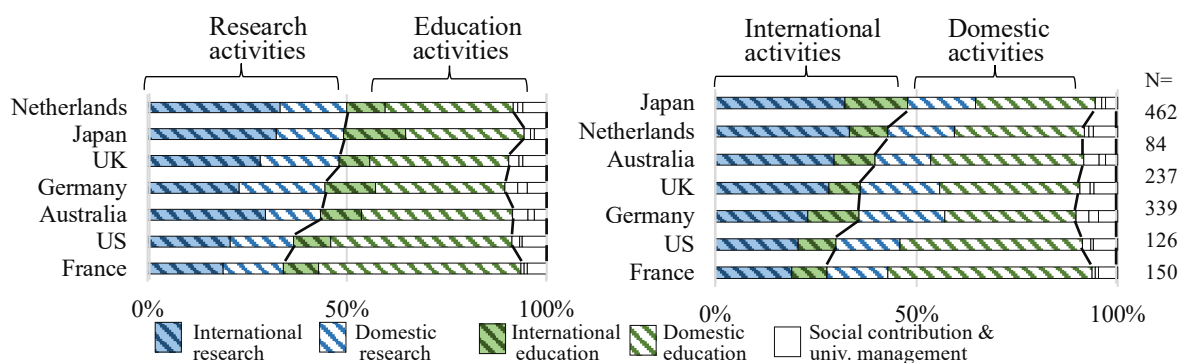


Indonesia and Vietnam, the primary destination is Japan (29 percent and 24 percent of SA faculty, respectively); and for Cambodia, the main destination is France (22 percent of SA faculty). In Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia, the top three or four destination countries each account for more than 50% of SA faculty. Because studying abroad for advanced degrees is a long-term process, most SA faculty in the four home countries receive some type of study abroad scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the choice of destination country is significantly influenced by the availability of such scholarships and the intentions of the scholarship providers.

In the questionnaire, SA faculty were asked which activities were most accelerated by their study abroad experience. The results are shown in Figure 6 by destination country.<sup>2</sup> The most accelerated activity cited by returnees from the Netherlands and Japan was international research activities (33% and 32%, respectively), while for the other five countries, domestic teaching activities were the most frequently cited activity. A comparison of these results, disaggregated into research activities (international + domestic) and teaching activities (international + domestic), as well as international activities (research + teaching) and domestic activities (research + teaching), shows that SA faculty consider that study experiences in Japan and the Netherlands promote research and international activities, while study experiences in France and the United States encourage teaching and domestic activities. In the interviews with the target faculty members, they also agreed on the characteristics of each destination country, noting that studying abroad in Japan is strong in research activities and study abroad in the US excels in teaching activities. They pointed to differences in graduate education

**Figure 6 : Most accelerated activities by SA experiences**

*Q: Please select the activity that you have accelerated most based on the knowledge/skills/networks you acquired in your study abroad among (1) domestic research, (2) international research, (3) domestic education, (4) international education, (5) social contribution and university management?*



Note: The figure shows the destination countries where more than 80 faculty members have studied abroad.

<sup>1</sup> More than 90% of SA faculty in all four countries receive scholarships to study abroad, but the providers of these scholarships vary widely from country to country. In Malaysia, already a middle-income country, 88% of SA faculty received scholarships from their own government or universities, while in Cambodia, 70% of SA faculty studied abroad through scholarships from international organizations or developed countries.

<sup>2</sup> Since the top seven study abroad destinations for the four countries combined are Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, France, Germany, and the Netherlands (covering 80% of SA faculty), these seven countries are discussed here.

programs in these countries and the continuity of academic relationships with the destination country after returning from study abroad<sup>3</sup> as factors in these differences.

To promote internationalization—essential for the development of education and research at leading universities—it is crucial to build a rich international network through a variety of host countries. In addition, it is important to diversify the destination countries in order to maximize the strengths and weaknesses of each country. Study abroad destinations for high-level human resources from developing countries are often concentrated in Western countries, such as former colonial powers, due to shared historical background and geopolitical conditions (Altbach 2003). In recent years, with the rise of world university rankings, rankings have sometimes been used as a significant indicator in the selection of universities for study abroad. However, it is difficult to compare destination countries and destination universities using quantified indices. This trend also carries the potential risk of losing the richness that diversity brings. The presence of faculty members who have studied in a variety of countries provides numerous options for improving university teaching and research, as well as opportunities to collaborate with a wider range of partners in promoting internationalization. In the target countries of this study, SA faculty members from leading universities tend to study in a limited number of countries. However, it is essential to diversify destination countries while taking into account the characteristics of disciplines and graduate education programs of host universities. Since study abroad scholarship programs have a significant influence on the selection of study destination countries, developing country governments, developed country governments,<sup>4</sup> and international organizations that provide scholarships should pay close attention to this point.

### Recommendation 3

The study abroad destinations of university faculty members from developing countries tend to be concentrated around a few countries. However, diversifying destinations not only contributes to the internationalization of universities by building a rich international network but also provides universities with diverse study abroad experiences and makes the most of the strengths and weaknesses of different destination countries. Since many of the scholarships for university faculty to study abroad for advanced degrees are publicly funded, governments of developing and developed countries, as well as international organizations that provide scholarships, should give due consideration to diversifying study abroad destinations.

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<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire survey results indicate that the percentage of faculty members who maintain contact with their academic advisors after returning from study abroad is over 70% for returnees from Japan and the Netherlands, compared to 38% and 48% for returnees from the UK and the US, respectively. Some research on university internationalization in Japan has found a high willingness among Japanese faculty members to maintain academic relationships with returning international graduate students (Kayashima 2019).

<sup>4</sup> In ODA-funded study abroad scholarship programs, it is important for governments of developed countries to balance their own needs for internationalization of higher education and acquisition of highly skilled human resources with the effects of higher education development in the partner countries.

## 5. Changing Role of Study Abroad

The results of the three analyses above suggest that the meaning of study abroad is changing. Many universities in developing countries were modeled after Western universities and developed by introducing advanced Western knowledge and technology through study abroad by their faculty members. The purpose of studying abroad was to bring foreign knowledge and experience back to their home countries. Since the 1990s, however, the rapid growth of higher education in Southeast Asia and the internationalization of higher education around the world have occurred simultaneously. Under these major tectonic shifts in higher education, the role of study abroad for Southeast Asian university faculty members seems to be changing from “transfer and introduction of advanced foreign knowledge and technology” to “gateway to an international academic network.”

International cooperation and competition are now essential for academic development, even in developing countries. For the development of higher education in developing countries, it is important to provide university faculty members with diverse and rich opportunities to study abroad and to create an environment in which their study abroad experiences can be used effectively, while maintaining a balance with the development of domestic graduate programs.

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