

# Japanese Studying Abroad: Motivation and Trends

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## 1. Introduction

It was recently reported by Mika Tanikawa in the New York Times that in Japan, “college educators and government often complain about waning student interests in overseas studies.”<sup>i</sup> The Japanese Ministry of Education, along with individual universities, is in fact pushing students to study overseas and become internationalized, but despite this, the number of students studying abroad is decreasing year by year. Furthermore, in his 2011 article “*Naze ryugakubanare wa okotteiru no ka?*” (Why are students no longer studying abroad?), Hiroshi Ota notes that the number of Japanese studying abroad remained relatively stable at 75000 since 1999. This number increased once in 2004, but since this point, the number has continued to decrease. On the other hand, the worldwide number of people studying abroad increased fourfold in the period from 1975 to 2008, according to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Additionally, about half of Japanese studying abroad choose the US as their destination<sup>ii</sup>, but this number also is a downward trend compared with other Asian countries like China and Korea. It seems clear that fewer Japanese students are choosing to spend time studying abroad. Mr. Ota asserts that this trend poses a serious problem for Japan because contemporary young people will be increasingly important in the global society of the future.

Currently, the globalisation of the world economy is progressing quickly, and exchange with foreign countries is extremely important to local economies, as pointed out by Haruaki

Deguchi in an article on the business information website Diamond<sup>iii</sup>. Some Japanese companies now require measured English ability for employment because of the growth of Japanese business overseas. For example, Rakuten and Uniqlo, which are known as representative companies of Japan, both decided to use English as a primary company language in 2012. However, as Tanikawa points out, major Japanese companies such as Panasonic and Sony have increased foreign employees to 30 to 80 percent<sup>iv</sup>. If Japanese also would like to be hired by such companies, they must be naturally required to have a high level of English ability in order to communicate within the company.

From these examples it is clear that English ability will become increasingly necessary for people working in Japanese companies, and study abroad is widely considered to be one of the best routes to achieving a high level of skill in communicative English. However, in spite of these needs, as reported in the sources above, the number of Japanese studying abroad has dropped since peaking in 2004. What are the reasons for this decline? In this essay, I would like to examine the reasons behind this trend and also suggest some ideas how to change the various systems influencing study abroad, such as universities, companies and the attitudes of society in general.

## 2. Japanese Studying Abroad

### 2.1 History of *ryugaku* (study abroad)

Many people would agree that the basic goal of studying abroad is the formation and

completion of character. The history of studying abroad in Japan is long, and new knowledge and skills have been introduced into Japan by international students from foreign countries since ancient times. In ancient Japan, both *kanji* characters and Buddhism crossed to Japan from China and the Korean Peninsula, but the political powers only began the dispatch of Japanese students to China in the late sixth century. Five young nuns were sent to Baekje, the state of the ancient Korean Peninsula, for the first time in 588. They returned safely, but traveling overseas was still a dangerous endeavor at the time, since shipbuilding technology was still in its infancy. In the Heian period (794-1185), studying abroad for a short time became a more mainstream pursuit. The costs involved in travel and study were covered by the state. In the 12th century, many Buddhist priests successively visited Song Dynasty China as a result of increased interest in Buddhism. On their return, other domestic priests were strongly influenced by them and studying abroad became increasingly popular. However, in the Muromachi period (1336-1573), crossing to China was prohibited, except for some temporary Japan-China trade. Up until this point, Japan had sent people as international students only to Asian countries, such as China. However, the Edo Shogunate began dispatching international students to Holland in 1862, and also to European countries, such as Britain and France. In 1866, the Edo Shogunate permitted Japanese citizens to travel overseas for the purpose of study. During the Meiji period (1868-1912), systematized overseas study was one of the more important national policies, due to the government's aspiration for modernization and westernization. Some well-known public figures experienced study abroad during this period, such as Prime Minister Hirobumi Itou, and novelists Souseki Natsume and Ougai Mori. After World War II, there were a number of academics studying abroad through a system

of scholarship, gaining experience in foreign lifestyles, and studying abroad systems were institutionalized by major companies. From the 1960s, when Japan began to experience rapid economic growth, private students became wealthy enough to travel abroad, but high exchange rates make foreign travel and study too expensive for most Japanese. More people became able to go abroad with each goal, and this became more accessible in 1985. These purposes are similar to current one, for example, language study, the working holiday aimed at gaining life experience, and to acquire qualifications. While studying abroad in the modern era was seen as a means of gaining a fuller personality for many Westerners, for countries like Japan as it was aiming at modernization, it also a way to developing civilization and society through the adoption of foreign ideas.

## 2.2 Recent trends

The graph in Figure 1 shows the change in numbers of Japanese studying abroad between the years 1983 and 2010. The vertical axis represents number of students, while the horizontal axis shows the years.

According to Japanese studying abroad figures tallied by the Ministry of Education, the number of Japanese people studying abroad reached record highs by 2002, but grew at a sluggish pace after that. 2004 saw a peak number of 83,000 students leaving Japan, with major destinations being the United States, China, and the United Kingdom.

What is the reason behind this drop in numbers? Tsuyoshi Saito, the author of a news report on Benesse education website, commented that some people assume that the number of people studying abroad also deserves to have decreased every year because the number of young people has decreased because of the dwindling birthrate<sup>v</sup>. However, compared

## ○日本から海外への留学者数の推移

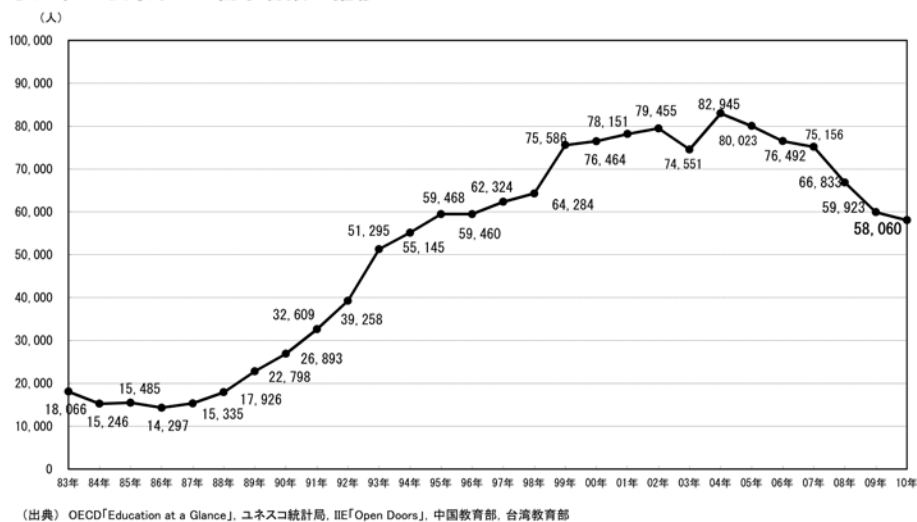


Figure 1. Number of Japanese studying abroad, by year. (Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan)

with 2010 and the peak year 2004, the number of people studying abroad decreased by 30%, while the number of people entering university actually rose. In other words, about decrease in the number of young people wanting go overseas is irrefutable.

Meanwhile, with the globalization of business developments, Japanese companies began competing with the rest of the world, rather than just within Japan. According to a survey conducted in February 2012 by Japanese job information site *DISCO*, 22% of 1245 companies answered that they are plan to employ people who has experienced studying abroad, up ten points from the previous survey. Besides, the percentage of Japanese companies that consider that studying abroad does not influence employment opportunity declined to 60% in 2010 from 72% in 2006. People who are able to be globally active seem to be increasingly needed by companies which aim to branch out overseas in the future. Therefore, university students especially need the experience

studying abroad and gaining communication skills in foreign languages. It is widely believed that studying and living in foreign countries is remarkably helpful as ways of not only increasing one's communication ability, but also broadening one's outlook.

### 2.3 Reasons for decline

In this section I would like to individually address some of the reasons that have been given for the decline in outbound student numbers.

#### 2.3.1 Financial reasons

Some have commented that the decrease in numbers of Japanese studying abroad is linked to economic reasons. For example, Hitomi Okazaki, on the employment information website *Riku-nabi* said that “one reason for (students) staying put was financial, given the state of the economy, especially since tuition in countries like the United States is soaring.”<sup>vii</sup>

In 2010, only 58,000 Japanese students

studied outside the country, in a large decrease from the record high of 83,000 achieved during the 2004 academic year. This decrease might be largely due to the struggling economy which affected families and increased their financial burdens, including those of paying for their children's education. Instead of pursuing further education abroad, students concentrated on finding jobs to help out their families<sup>viii</sup>.

According to the popular website *Ryugaku Journal*, which provides information in Japanese on visiting foreign countries for study or for work, the average cost for a language study abroad (tuition and travel expenses combined) totals between 160 million to 300 million yen per person per year.<sup>ix</sup> According to the Ministry of Education, popular study abroad destinations among Japanese students are the United States of America, China, Britain, Australia, and Taiwan<sup>x</sup>. Hiroshi Ota, in his piece *Naze ryugakubanare wa okotteiru no ka?* (Why are students no longer studying abroad?), states that one of the reasons for decrease in number of people studying abroad is the high cost of university tuition in English-speaking countries. For instance, at many influential American universities, students require at least fifty thousand dollars for their total expenses per year.<sup>xi</sup> Moreover, they are required to demonstrate their amount of money more than this cost as certification of bank account when applying to studying abroad, so the average Japanese family has extreme difficulty letting their children go abroad while the Japanese economy is flagging and savings are low. According to a research paper published by the Inter-University Seminar for the Future of Japan (ISFJ), a student policy forum, it is also supposed that one of the reasons for decrease in study abroad numbers is an increase in students who are forced to give up study abroad plans on economic grounds. Researchers assume an increase in students who cannot cope with the

cost of studying abroad for reasons such as cuts in their parents' annual earnings. There is data that indicates that the higher a parents' annual salary, the greater the children's the four-year university entrance rate increase<sup>xii</sup>. There are currently scholarship systems, such as the one created and run by the Japan Student Services Organization, but ultimately, parents' income has a huge influence on the prospective academic courses of their children. On current figures, parents who have a child entering four-year university have to pay about 450 million yen for admission and tuition fees over four years<sup>xiii</sup>, and some of them need to send additional allowance money for children to live by themselves. Given this data, and Japan's current economic climate, it is easy to guess that a large number of families have to cut back on studying abroad because of financial reasons.

### 2.3.2 English language ability

According to an article in the *ICEF Monitor*, a dedicated market intelligence resource for the international education industry, anxiety language barriers were commonly a cited reason among students' disinterest in study abroad<sup>xiv</sup>. Besides, Ota Hiroshi points out a delay in the development of international education exchange programs at Japanese universities<sup>xv</sup>. Compared with other countries, international program development at Japanese universities is often delayed. This is nothing less than a lack of effort on the part of the institutions to attract students to studying overseas. As a major problem of Japanese higher education, the delay of university globalization is a major issue, but such case focuses mainly on small and midsize private universities. Furthermore, there is little government support for most of these cases. The government's support is more likely to focus on high level universities, but appealing programs of studying abroad, including short term ones, are still not adequately developed. In

addition, the number of programs in which one is able to have plural degrees (double degree) through studying abroad while in university is extremely small. Although this program is now a world trend, the Ministry of Education still has not accepted it. On the other hand, we are required a certain level of TOEFL and TOEIC tests to study abroad. According to *Ryugaku Jaanaru*, students need a score of between 46 to 80 in the TOEFL iBT in order to attend a foreign college or four-year university. The transition to TOEFL iBT was completed in 2006, and it became an integrated test of four language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. It is not only the relative difficulty of the question gets higher, but also grammatical questions are excluded. Moreover, since speaking tests which Japanese students have been traditionally poor at, were added, it become harder to attain high score without special preparation lectures. In fact, figures quoted by Ota show that the average English speaking test score of Japanese test-taker is the lowest level of the countries sampled, while writing test scores are also second-lowest<sup>xvi</sup>. High level universities in English-speaking countries tend to demand an appropriately high level of English ability for all exchange students, but the number of Japanese students who cannot fulfill the requested score, even if they want to study abroad, is increasing. Besides, some indicate that the difficulty of the new TOEFL test leads to an avoidance of English language study and studying abroad. Meanwhile, the English ability of both Chinese and Korean students is improving steadily, and study abroad prerequisites are not such a serious problem as in Japan. It is therefore necessary, according to Ota, to reconsider Japanese English education fundamentally from this point of view.

### 2.3.3 Lack of interest in foreign culture/language

The New York Times article reported

some comments from Naoki Ogi, a professor of education at Hosei University in Tokyo, about fewer Japanese students studying abroad. He has compiled his own theory of why this is the case. Young Japanese were increasingly becoming introverted and risk-averse, Mr. Ogi said, and were unwilling and ill-prepared to take on new challenges. He added that he believed their lack of interest in going abroad was part of that growing unease with the unknown and challenging situations. According to Mr. Ogi, "They (Japanese students) are growing mentally weak and feeble and some even lack basic survival instincts."<sup>xvii</sup> Recently, it is often commented in the media that Japanese youth are becoming increasingly inward-oriented. Compared with other Asian students, the number of Japanese students studying abroad has decreased. It is said that young Japanese have lost interest in foreign countries from this tendency, and words such as *uchi-muki* (inward-looking) and *soshoku-ka* ('herbivorous', meek people) are often quoted in the media. This lack of energy and motivation is apparent even to foreign students in Japan. An example is Hochuen Kwan, a study abroad sophomore at Waseda University in Tokyo, who opines that Japanese university students do not use much energy in studying hard<sup>xviii</sup>.

However, according to a survey prepared by a study group of Yoshio Higuchi at Keio University, though young Japanese are said to have a lack of interest of foreign countries, their interest in studying abroad remains high. Consequently, it is concluded in the article "*Nihonjin daigakusei no ryugaku sokushin seisaku* (A Study Abroad Promotion Policy for Japanese University Students)" that the decreasing trend of study abroad is not fully explained by this, and it is more rational to take action to promote study abroad based on other known barriers. In his article, Akira Kobayashi, professor at Meiji University in Tokyo, states

that his students whom he contacts routinely are quite overseas-conscious and hope to have the chance to study abroad regardless of the length of time, while at university<sup>xix</sup>. Thus it seems that a decrease in student motivation is not as significant factor as it is sometimes made out to be.

Kobayashi believes that the most important problem is how much a university understands students' circumstances and employs concrete ideas to enable study abroad opportunities<sup>xx</sup>. The international society is a community in which people should co-exist across their different cultures. Japanese universities have a responsibility to get students who do not want to go overseas interested in study abroad, but that vision is not necessarily shared by all parties at universities. Universities are generally supportive of study abroad fairs, counseling, orientation for students hoping to study abroad, but Kobayashi suspects that in general, information provided by universities is insufficient, especially for students who are not interested in study abroad to begin with, but have the means and opportunity to participate<sup>xxi</sup>.

The question remains then, what are young Japanese interested in? They invest their limited funds in various choices such as hobbies, education, and entertainment. As a result, the value of studying abroad may have fallen down their lists of priorities.

### 2.3.4 Image of foreign countries

Ota mentions in his article the convenience of modern Japan as one of the reasons for fewer Japanese studying abroad.<sup>xxii</sup> The economic miracle of postwar Japan gave rise to a convenient and comfortable society- a situation that is sometimes hard to leave. Ota believes that the younger generation is not finding value in taking the trouble to open up to difficult situations which arise when attempting to understand a wide variety of foreign customs

and cultures. Ota claims that it is possible that young Japanese have lost admiration and interest for foreign countries, due to a highly-developed culture exchange and increasing school trips to foreign countries. A more affluent and open Japan means that study abroad has lost its novelty.

### 2.3.5 Job-hunting schedule clash

Many educators and experts state that another cause of the decrease in study abroad numbers lies in the job hunting practices of graduating students. "A likely reason for the fall in the number of students studying abroad is a fear among students that if they study abroad, they may lose the chance to find employment when they come back to Japan from their studies", stated the editorial in *The Japan Times Weekly* in 2011<sup>xxiii</sup>.

Since 1996, the job hunting process starts in the autumn of university students' third year and reaches its peak by the end of that year at all fourth-year universities. As a result, students are disinclined to take time off from this to study abroad. Additionally, since all new recruits are hired and begin at the same time, it is extremely difficult to try looking for a job after going through studying abroad experience, when one's fellow students have already secured employment.

The survey result of affairs of university graduating students who found a job in 2010 by the Ministry of Education is 57.6% and this percentage declines no less than 4.9%, compared to the previous year. Risk awareness with regards to employment appears to be increasing, and Akira Kobayashi sees this as a key problem. Additionally, the gradual lengthening of the job hunting process adds to students' anxiety about the continuing economic downturn upward financial crisis. In 2012, in response to this problem, the Japan Business Federation announced that they will push

forward the start of the job hunting season from October 1<sup>st</sup> to December 1<sup>st</sup>. However, Mr. Kobayashi said that this level of shift is quite unlikely to be recognized by students as a direct and immediate solution to the study abroad conundrum. Therefore, students tend to step up their efforts in studying for additional qualifications, and studying abroad is now becoming an unpopular option in their busy student years. In addition to seasonal problems, the study group of Yoshio Higuchi reports that students sometimes believe that studying abroad has no value if it is not seen to directly influence their prospect of employment<sup>xxiv</sup>. The promotion of studying abroad has no meaning if Japanese society does not understand the importance of making use of students' study abroad experience. It is fair to suppose that society's attitude toward study abroad experience is ambiguous. Hiroshi Ota says that he interviews recruitment staff and students taking part in job interviews who not think that companies rate students' experiences of studying abroad<sup>xxv</sup>. In the past, there was a sense that the Japanese economic recession gave meaning and motivation to study abroad; however, this is no longer necessarily the case.

### 3. Conclusion

As we have seen, there are numerous possible reasons for the recent decline in Japanese students' interest in study abroad. These include financial reasons, falling English ability, lack of interest in foreign culture and language, and clashes with job-hunting schedule. Of these, the most pressing would seem to be a harmful effect of increased time, energy and money being expended by students in their job-hunting efforts. According to Yoshio Higuchi survey, the problems of financial resources and poor English ability are both significant bottlenecks in allowing students to study abroad,

but students with study abroad experience report that rather than these, financial and English language issues pose more problems. Many students who do not end up studying abroad seem have given up the idea of going through fear of having their job hunting schedule postponed.<sup>xxvi</sup> It is also reasonable to assume that some students studies abroad in spite of these shortcomings.

In order to revive interest in study abroad, perhaps it would be useful to support universities and society local organizations. Yoshio Higuchi's Association suggests that contemporary Japanese companies need to give greater recognition to the study abroad experience of students, and make allowances for this during job hunting. Study abroad is vital for Japanese students, and consequently, the future of the country in a globalised society. Since Japan is an island nation with its own language and culture, study abroad experience remains one of the few methods by which Japanese can interact with the rest of the world. Of course, the rise of the internet and the communication channels it provides has lessened the need for study abroad, but this alone is not enough. The Japan Times Weekly points this out in no uncertain terms: "The government and private sector must realize that a decline in the number of students studying abroad could have a devastating effect on the future of Japan".<sup>xxvii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Tanikawa Mika, *Fewer Japanese Students Studying Abroad*, The New York Times, February 20, 2011

<sup>ii</sup> Ota Hiroshi, *Naze ryugakubanare wa okotteiru no ka?* (Why are students no longer studying abroad?), *Kyoiku to Igaku* (Education and Medicine), 59(1):69

<sup>iii</sup> Deguchi Haruaki, *Wakamono ga kaigairyugaku wo shitagaranaai genin ha nihonkigyō no uchimukitaishitsu ni aru.* (Reasons for youth not

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