研究論文

Improving Study Abroad Programs for Japanese University Students: Partner University and Student Perspectives

日本人大学生のための海外留学プログラム改善：提携大学と学生の視点

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Study abroad (SA) programs benefit participants' personal growth but also present challenges as students adapt to new sociocultural contexts (Allen & Ramonda, 2023). Successful pre-departure preparation is essential to provide students with the academic, cultural and emotional foundations (Humphreys & Baker, 2021). Moreover, host university SA managers and coordinators play critical roles in facilitating successful sojourns, but their voices are underrepresented in the literature (Allen, 2023). To fill this gap, the authors surveyed 28 mobility staff from seven countries, asking how the SA experience can be improved for Japanese students, and triangulated their data with responses from 105 English majors who sojourned in 2023. Results highlighted that, although Kansai University Faculty of Foreign Language Studies (KUFFLS) students are comparatively well-prepared for their SA experience, four main themes arose from the coordinators related to preparation, student empowerment, acculturation and extracurricular integration. While student responses generally affirmed the partner universities' positive observations about their preparedness, they also highlighted challenges related to differing expectations of student independence, cultural nuances, and integrating extracurricular activities with academic demands. These results suggest that before SA, home and host universities should cooperate in developing realistic student expectations about their independence, cultural differences and extracurricular engagement.

Key words
Study abroad (SA), acculturation, student empowerment, extracurricular integration, coordination.

1. Introduction

Study abroad (SA) is a time of personal and academic growth, immersing oneself in new languages, cultures, experiences, and relationships. Scholars have defined SA as "a temporary prescheduled educational stay in a country where the target language is spoken among community members" (Taguchi, 2018, p. 127). While language acquisition and development are a strong focus of many such SA programs, more importantly, students develop interpersonal and intercultural competence and engage in other academic and non-academic (extracurricular) activities (Allen & Ramonda, 2023). Researchers have identified the positive and challenging aspects students face while abroad (e.g., Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). For example, Allen and Ramonda (2023) outlined the following positive and challenging aspects of SA:

Table 1
Key Benefits and Challenges of SA

Benefits	Challenges
Improve language skills	Feeling like an outsider
Experience different styles of teaching	Difficulties with language and cultural barriers
Expand social networks	Homesickness and loss of usual support network
Learn new cultures	Feeling lonely, anxious, and depressed
Develop confidence and other interpersonal skills	Fear of missing out
Gain experience in another cultural context	Culture shock

(Adapted from Allen & Ramonda, 2023, p. 95)

Despite the benefits and challenges, researchers have noted that SA programs are quite varied and include many types, forms and durations; for example, long, short, coordinated, reciprocal, faculty-led, etc. (Whalen, 2008). The program focused on this study is fully coordinated, compulsory, and incorporated into the undergraduate degree curriculum. Students undertake studies in language skills with the hope that they matriculate into undergraduate courses with local and other international students. Such undergraduate courses are related to the focus of the home faculty, which include interpretation and translation, intercultural communication, area studies, foreign language education, and international and regional cooperation. While there are many other forms of SA, few studies have investigated how these programs are coordinated and improved based on the insights gathered from important stakeholders (i.e., coordinators and students).

As a result, this study examines how university preparation, ongoing support and engagement influence the SA experience of Japanese students. The study includes perspectives from

the host partner universities and the home students. These perspectives identify factors contributing to successful student transition and integration from home to host institution, highlighting areas that require improvement to enhance the SA experience. Overall, the study aims to explore stakeholder reports (managers and students) that focus on the effectiveness of SA program management and identify areas of (potential) agreement between them. The following section discusses studies on pre-departure preparation, academic and extracurricular integration, and institutional support and coordination to contextualise the study.

2. Literature Review

This section discusses the literature on SA programs and pre-departure preparation and their significance for their success. Furthermore, we examine how coordinators support students transitioning from home to host institutions.

2.1. Pre-departure Preparation

From both students' and coordinators' perspectives, pre-departure preparation is integral to successful SA programs (Maune, 2016). This preparation provides students with the foundational elements of their SA program, including the academic, cultural, and personal adjustment that they may experience (Humphreys & Baker, 2021). The preparation is significant for successful SA programs because it prepares students to face challenges associated with living, fosters smoother transitions between home and host institutions, and enhances the overall learning experience (Maune, 2016). Overall, such preparation includes academic, cultural, linguistic, logistical and emotional readiness, further explored below.

Limited research has shown that SA pre-departure preparation focuses on academic elements, including host university expectations, varied teaching styles, and new course features and structures to reduce anxiety and facilitate adjustment (Van Amelsvoort, 1999). Essentially, scholars have indicated that pre-departure preparation attempts to reduce uncertainty and adverse reactions to differences in the learning environment (Jarman-Walsh, 2015). As noted in previous literature, these courses include discussions around diverse academic cultures that Japanese students may need to familiarize themselves with, such as expectations for classroom participation, presentations, and independent learning (Tani, 2008). In addition, Humphreys and Baker (2021) noted that pre-departure preparation should also focus on classroom behaviors and assessment expectations — for example, the interactive nature of lectures and tutorials and differences in grading protocols.

In addition to academic preparation, training in languages and cultures is essential in the pre-departure phase, ensuring that students succeed during their sojourn. Through their analysis of 15 first-year Chinese international students, Zhang et al. (2022) noted that cultural preparedness through experiential learning helped to manage expectations, reduce culture shock, and foster intercultural competence. Moreover, studies have shown that some students are not always prepared for the linguistic challenges they face during their SA program and thus report negative experiences (Goldoni, 2015). As student's linguistic experiences extend both in the classroom and their daily lives, this is an essential component of the preparation program (Goldoni, 2015). As such, students should receive training on linguistic knowledge and sociopragmatic abilities required to communicate in all contexts (Zhang et al., 2022).

Lastly, scholars have detailed how assisting students with travel logistics and discussing pastoral care issues, have positive effects on SA (Vasseur et al., 2022). However, some studies have shown that pastoral care elements of the SA experience are not explicitly discussed, and thus may lead to negative experiences. As noted by Grieb (2023),

> For students who have had little experience engaging with cultural differences, it can be difficult to anticipate experiences they may encounter while abroad. For this reason, it is up to institutions and the administrators who are supporting students pursuing study abroad experiences to assist them in self-reflection and pre-departure preparation. Typical pre-departure preparation (international cell phone plans, how much money to bring in which currency, what to pack, where they are living, etc) that focus on the tourist level experience of study abroad do not readily engage students with the type of adversity, discomfort, or destabilizing experiences they may have while abroad. (p. 84)

These studies underscore the significance of comprehensive pre-departure preparation, which addresses academic, linguistic, and cultural competencies as well as students' logistical arrangements and emotional well-being. Beyond preparation, the role of managers and coordinators in supporting students throughout the SA experience is equally critical, as explored in the following section.

2.2. SA Management and Support

Previous research has suggested that SA managers, coordinators, and administrative staff play a vital role in these programs, ensuring institutional goals and student needs are met (Allen, 2023). The management and support of SA programs are essential for ensuring

successful sojourns and meaningful student experiences. They also create and maintain relationships between host and home institutions and ensure the well-being of students (Allen, 2023). As a result, their roles and responsibilities go beyond the logistical coordination (though this is an integral part of their job and often overlooked), including pastoral care. Coordinators and administrators also ensure that academic integration occurs and that educational requirements are fulfilled. More specifically, SA coordinators are responsible for a variety of key functions, which includes program design, student preparation, monitoring student well-being and performance, and managing day-to-day issues and crises when they occur (López Cirugeda et al., 2024). For example, Mammadova and Allen (2024) noted,

> The responsibilities of managers and coordinators can be categorized into several areas: administrative tasks (e.g., managing documents and records), program negotiation (e.g., coordinating course offerings), support for outgoing and incoming students (e.g., arranging accommodations and other logistics), establishing effective communication with faculty, departments, and professional services across the university, developing and overseeing high-quality administrative processes to offer centralized support, and managing risks. (p. 3)

As such, the success of these programs depend on the efforts of coordinators, administrative staff and other stakeholders (Whalen, 2008).

Despite the significant role coordinators play in facilitating SA programs, few studies have focused on the various aspects of their job (Allen, 2023). SA coordinator roles often extend beyond pre-departure phases and continue throughout the students' sojourn and reentry. For example, administrative staff are often responsible for the organisation of and engagement in extracurricular activities, such as community-based experiential learning (Whalen, 2008). These staff members are also responsible for monitoring program quality, implementing feedback mechanisms to improve program offerings, liaising with host/home universities and keeping communication channels open (Mammadova & Allen, 2024).

As a result of the discussions in this section and the current gap in the literature, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What perspectives do coordinators share on the management of SA programs?
2. In what ways do coordinator and student perspectives align on the SA experience?
3. How can stakeholder feedback contribute to enhancing the design and support of SA programs?

In the next section, we outline the methodology adopted in this study to answer the research

questions.

3. Data collection and analysis

The first author contacted the partner universities and conducted an online qualitative survey (Braun et al., 2021) using Google Forms for an invited presentation (Humphries, 2023). This paper concentrates on replies to an open-response question: "How can we improve the SA experience for Japanese students?" We received 28 responses to the survey, and 26 people answered this question. They worked in various regions (Table 2).

Table 2
Respondents' workplace locations

Location	Frequency
The United States	7
New Zealand	5
Taiwan	4
Germany	4
The United Kingdom	3
Australia	3
France	2

Most participants had administrative roles for international offices and language centers (11). In addition to these roles, the respondents had a variety of roles, including language center director (6), international office director (5), language teacher/academic staff (5), and dean (1). To maintain their anonymity, respondents are referred to in this paper by their workplace location and a letter (e.g. "USA A" and "Taiwan C"). Despite the various roles, we refer to the partner university stakeholders collectively as coordinators.

We collected data from 105 English majors who studied abroad in 2023 (their sophomore year) from Kansai University's Faculty of Foreign Language Studies (KUFFLS). Aligned with the Japanese academic year, most students departed in the spring (February-April) and sojourned for 9-10 months. During the initial two-thirds of their SA, they studied academic English courses with international students, and then, during the final semester, if they qualified for CEFR upper-B2 level, they studied undergraduate language and culture modules with local students. In contrast, some participants selected the dual language SA program, where they studied L3 language skills in their minor language country (France, Germany, Taiwan or South

Korea) with international students, and English as a medium of instruction (Baker, 2021) with primarily local students.

After completing their SA, students completed a survey in Japanese that asked for positive and negative comments about (a) partner university classes, (b) non-academic aspects of the partner university program, (c) general life, (d) the overall SA program and (e) support from KUFFLS. Student responses are anonymized by location and number (e.g., USA s7).

Using inductive thematic analysis, we explored the partner university data for themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Subsequently, the student questionnaire strengthened our analysis's trustworthiness (credibility and confirmability) through triangulation (Guba, 1981). We searched the student data deductively for comments that supported, elaborated, or diverged from the coordinators' assertions.

4. Results

Partner university respondents mentioned several areas for improving SA for Japanese students, which included (a) increasing contact between pre-departure and returnee students (2 responses), (b) increasing financial support (1 response), (c) reducing paperwork and restrictions such as fixed travel dates (2 responses), (d) improving recruitment at host universities to provide more student diversity (1 response), (e) train students to improve their language comprehension (3 responses), (f) increase pre-departure preparation with destination buddies and coordinators (3 responses) and (g) increase contact between the home university and sojourners (1 response). However, since some of these areas were mentioned only a few times, our report concentrates on the four categories with the highest response frequencies (Table 3).

Table 3
Categories arising from participants' responses

Category	Sample	Frequency
Preparation	"Kansai [KUFFLS] does a very good job preparing students for their SA experience."	6
Student empowerment	"Encouraging students to be more independent"	8
Acculturation	"We live in one of the safest and calmest areas of the USA and sometimes Japanese students still have trouble adjusting"	8
Extracurricular integration	"Disseminate the message that much of their learning will likely take place outside of the classroom"	6

These results are detailed in subsequent sections from the coordinators' followed by students' perspectives.

4.1. Preparation

4.1.1 Preparation: Partner responses

Although the survey question *encouraged* coordinators to suggest improvements for Japanese students' SA, it is noteworthy that over a fifth of respondents described the effective preparation of KUFFLS sojourners; for example, "To be honest, Kansai [KUFFLS] students are much better prepared and have higher achievement rates than most SA students I've seen" (New Zealand B). USA G explicitly focused on the home university's beneficial preparation process: "I think Kansai [KUFFLS] does a very good job preparing students for their SA experience. Students come prepared, having a fairly good understanding of the requirements and logistics of the program they have signed up for." Moreover, USA E noted that the program is well-established: "We've been running the Kansai [KUFFLS] program for so long, I feel like we have it down to a fine art."

The unique dual language program, where the English majors sojourn in their L3 country, may be considered more challenging, as they travel after only approximately 100 contact hours of L3 learning (Humphries et al., in review). However, the partners from Taiwan and France gave positive feedback. The students have a sound basis for learning: "I think they are pretty good already. It is not difficult for them to learn Chinese, and with the supporting English environment we provide, I see smiles and success in their faces" (Taiwan B). Students adjust to their environment: "We generally find they are quite easy to manage and adapt" (France B). In contrast, one German-based respondent hinted at an awareness of a few issues they were addressing: "We are already working on the most critical aspects" (Germany C).

4.1.2 Preparation: Student responses

The students' responses regarding SA preparation were divided into two perspectives. Positive feedback included comments such as, "As it was my first time studying abroad, I felt more prepared due to the SA orientation sessions" (New Zealand s7) and "The information provided beforehand gave me a sense of security about studying abroad" (New Zealand s4). Many of these positive opinions came from students who felt anxious about their upcoming SA experience. One student who had previously studied abroad in high school commented, "The information about the partner universities was more systematically organized than when I was in high school, making it easier to compare and understand each university's features" (UK s3).

Furthermore, the SA preparation integrates well with the compulsory first-year course, Study Skills 基礎演習, which provides not only basic academic skills at Kansai University — such as how to compose academic writing assignments and make presentations — but also allows students to summarize and make a short presentation about partner universities in class, as the SA program is an essential part of the faculty's curriculum. Students even take regular quizzes on each partner. Many students noted that this collaboration with the Study Skills course enhanced their understanding of the SA program and helped them prepare for participation. As one student shared, "My lecturer gave weekly quizzes on each partner university's capital cities, culture, and program specifics. It was challenging due to the volume of information to memorize, but I believe it greatly contributed to my SA preparation" (UK s2). This hands-on preparation mirrors partner comments about KUFFLS's well-organized approach to SA, such as USA E's praise of the program's "fine art" of preparation.

However, some students provided negative feedback regarding SA preparation. The primary criticism was the limited sharing of real-life experiences from senior students. For example, one student mentioned, "I wanted to hear more about the experiences of senior students, but there were hardly any opportunities to do so" (USA s6). Time zone differences and mismatched academic calendars between Japanese and partner universities create logistical challenges in facilitating communication between first-year students and their second-year counterparts studying abroad. Additionally, the SA negotiation team refines the program with partner coordinators to improve it, meaning that first-year students may not always follow in the footsteps of upper-year students. This requires careful management to prevent discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences abroad.

Some students in the dual-language SA Program expressed anxiety and demotivation, claiming improving their English skills would be more challenging than for peers in English-speaking countries and would require additional effort to maintain. One student noted, "Staff in the SA center said that it would be difficult to improve my English skills through the dual-language SA Program, and I felt a little worried even before I went" (Germany s2). This anxiety reflects a mismatch between student expectations and the program structure despite the generally positive partner feedback. However, this concern did not extend to students who communicated face-to-face with the coordinator during their visit to promote the program. For example, one student shared, "The coordinator helped overcome my concerns about dual-language learning by sharing specific cases where KUFFLS students had succeeded in both English and Chinese" (Taiwan s3).

4.2.1 Student empowerment: Partner responses

This category encompasses suggestions for helping students become more independent, resilient, and reflective, with proactive attitudes toward solving problems and taking initiative. Partners want us to "encourage greater engagement pre-departure" (Australia A) and "help students to set their own learning goals and study plans" (Taiwan C). USA D called for "substantial, meaningful … orientations and debriefings" before, during and after SA because "preparation and reflection are critical to maximizing beneficial outcomes." Encouraging independence and managing expectations could reduce culture shock: "While the teachers are supportive, students while in Australia are treated as independent adults. This suits some Japanese students but can be a shock to others" (Australia B). One partner explained how sojourners needed to speak out more to navigate potential misconceptions: "include reflective learning techniques and resilience, also, an understanding of why it's important to communicate openly and verbally from the outset (as opposed to 'reading the air') to minimise misunderstandings. This can be challenging for Japanese students" (UK A).

Other partners outlined the benefits of student empowerment. For example, a positive mindset should "take fears away as early as possible in order to encourage even more students to 'dare' the wonderful experience of SA" (Germany A). This positive outlook was reinforced by USA F: "We have found that students who are hands-on in the application process feel more comfortable and confident in asking questions, finding information, and finding assistance." USA G gave the strongest endorsement for encouraging students to move beyond taking the minimum from their SA, in favour of grasping their opportunities:

> When I think about what is different between students who have extremely positive SA experiences versus students who don't have as good of experiences it seems to come down to whether students see the SA structure provided as a starting point and framework for them to create their own unique and personalized experience through their own initiative, following their own interests/friendships; or whether they see SA staff and program structure as the end-all/be-all and rely only on the "mandatory" components and requirements to be the totality of their SA experience. I'm sure this is mentioned over and over again in preparing students to study abroad, but the more students can be convinced that they have a hand in determining how "successful" their program is by how much they take their own initiative is extremely important.

4.2.2. Student empowerment: Student responses

Student responses reflect both support for and challenges with the goals of empowerment and independence that partner universities highlight in their suggestions. Many students acknowledged significant personal growth, particularly in autonomy, problem-solving, and self-confidence, which aligns with the partners' goal of fostering independence. For many students, studying abroad was their first experience living independently, which inherently required them to adapt, make decisions, and navigate new environments without familial or teacher support. One student reported,

> Unlike in Japan, where teachers and my parents provided constant support, I had to rely on myself and make my own decisions, and I felt stressed. During the first few weeks of the SA program, I often called or texted my mom for advice. But, seeing other local and international students taking care of themselves made me realize I should be independent. (Germany s1)

This is consistent with Australia B's insight that treating students as independent adults, though initially a shock to some, ultimately promotes resilience and self-reliance.

However, students also expressed frustration with the expectation of self-directed learning and personal responsibility for engagement, especially regarding classroom participation. For instance, lecturers' lack of classroom management was a recurring issue; students felt that it was the teacher's role to manage participation rather than relying solely on student initiative. For example, one student commented, "I had a problem with a student who lacked initiative and did not participate in group work during class. I believe teachers should give direct guidance to make students engage with their learning, so I was puzzled as to why the teacher didn't address this" (USA s11). This perspective contrasts with the partner universities' goal of fostering proactive student engagement, suggesting that different beliefs about the role of teaching may shape Japanese students' expectations. While partner universities emphasize self-directed learning, Japanese students often anticipate more structured instructor guidance. UK A noted that Japanese students may be less inclined to *communicate openly and verbally* without clear prompting. This tendency may stem from the teaching approach in Japan, where teachers often provide direct instructions. Such contrasts in educational beliefs may lead to misunderstandings and unmet expectations in more independent learning environments abroad.

While this category focused on facilitating students' abilities to face challenges and seize opportunities, the next category looks outward to their intercultural challenges.

4.3.1. Acculturation: Partner responses

Partners' broad concern was that students needed more awareness of cultural differences. From one perspective, Japan might be considered uncommon for its high service and safety, causing frustration for students who "need better orientation to how unique Japan really is in terms of safety, transport, orderliness, politeness, etc. We live in one of the safest and calmest areas of the USA and sometimes Japanese students still have trouble adjusting" (USA A). There was also concern that they might have an idealized image of their destinations; therefore, they need "preparation for the real experience, e.g. not everyone in the UK is white, not every experience will be good (though hopefully most of them will be) - which I think is awareness of modern UK life" (UK B).

Partners outlined various ways to improve intercultural awareness. Students could develop mindfulness about what they wanted from SA: "remind them to set the Taiwanese culture they want to know and the Taiwanese life they want to experience" (Taiwan C). Other suggestions included (a) explicit tuition: "giving some modules on intercultural differences and what to expect (specific to each country)" (France A); (b) arranging "cultural experiences" (New Zealand D); (c) classes or activities with "foreign students and teachers before they go abroad" (France B); and (d) pre-departure classes with the host university: "Synchronous Zoom classroom preparation, once a week for a month, before leaving" (USA B).

4.3.2. Acculturation: Student responses

Students' responses both supported and challenged partner perspectives on acculturation, reflecting a variety of experiences and expectations. In terms of safety, students generally acknowledged differences from Japan, where safety standards are exceptionally high. Most students felt relatively secure in their host environments, but some noted that they had initially overestimated the level of security abroad as they became accustomed to it. For instance, one student commented, "I missed the last bus at night, so when I walked home, my host family was quite upset with me" (UK s10). This feedback corresponds with partners' concerns that Japanese students might not fully anticipate and understand the differences in safety standards they would encounter abroad.

Students also highlighted challenges in adapting to living conditions, such as dormitory cleanliness, interpersonal conflicts with roommates, and issues with homestay arrangements. These responses indicate that students may have struggled with different personal space and hygiene standards compared to those in Japan. Regarding homestays, several students found their experiences did not echo their expectations of family-like interactions often described in

Japanese media, such as TV shows and movies. Instead, relationships with host families sometimes resembled tenant-landlord dynamics. Therefore, some students insisted that, given they were paying for their stay, the service from host families should be more like a hotel experience. One student expressed, "I don't expect VIP like high service, but we paid money, so we're technically 'guests,' and they should act accordingly" (USA s5). Issues with host families were a significant concern for students in the SA program, emphasizing, as suggested by partners, the need for clearer guidance on the diversity and realities of host family arrangements to help students manage their initial expectations.

In addition to these suggestions for increasing intercultural awareness pre-departure, partners considered ways to improve integration outside the classroom during SA.

4.4.1. Extracurricular integration: Partner responses

The partners called for more immersion outside classes with local students (New Zealand A), international students (Germany B) and the local society (New Zealand E). Taiwan C mentioned expanding learners' perspectives to "find the benefits of participating in the SA program beyond earning credits." Opinions diverged on how this could be achieved. Germany B recommended offering "social integration" through "events, programs." In contrast, UK A focused on individual awareness: "ensuring students know they must take some personal responsibility for integration (despite their nerves, any mistakes made whilst speaking = a learning opportunity!)" and an emphasis on grasping opportunities off-campus: "much of their learning will likely take place outside of the classroom … so getting involved in extracurricular activities is incredibly important." According to UK C, extracurricular activities need to be accredited to help students break out of their limited worldviews and expand their communicative repertoires, which "would break SA out of the peer-group conveyor belt … [and] take learning outside the classroom."

4.4.2. Extracurricular integration: Student responses

Many students expressed that extracurricular integration is a desirable benefit, particularly through events hosted by local students of the same age. Some students mentioned that staying in dormitories facilitated spontaneous exchanges, providing Japanese students with valuable opportunities to build relationships with international peers and expand their global perspectives. For example, one student shared, "Thanks to the dormitory, we had many opportunities to interact with local students. Each flat took turns holding small parties, and by participating in these, I made many friends" (German s2). This feedback supports partners' suggestions to foster

social integration off campus, as dormitories naturally promoted more frequent, informal interactions.

While a few student responses resonate with partners' emphasis on extracurricular integration, most responses called attention to some challenges. They raised concerns about balancing extracurricular activities with academic demands, which sometimes hindered the intended benefits of these experiences. Some reported that activities already incorporated into the SA program, such as volunteer work and internships, occasionally felt overwhelming. A few students noted, "Scheduling for volunteer work was kind of challenging because I had to handle the coursework at the same time. And sometimes the location for volunteer work is far away from where I lived, adding another layer of difficulty" (USA s9). In light of their feedback, structural support, including consideration for logistics, is necessary to help students balance extracurricular activities with their academic obligations, even as they take personal responsibility for engaging in local culture. As UK C suggested, formalizing and accrediting extracurricular engagement within the curriculum could motivate students and better support their active cultural participation without compromising their academic commitments.

In summary, responses indicated that KUFFLS students were better prepared than many other sojourners, but they suggested ways to empower and acclimatize them for this dramatic stage of their lives. In addition to developing support mechanisms and student awareness, it is interesting to note their emphasis on student integration and development outside the classroom for a fuller SA experience.

5. Discussion

The first research question focused on shared perspectives from the stakeholders at partner universities. Four main themes arose: preparation, student empowerment, acculturation and extracurricular integration.

The themes from research question one reflect the consensus among program managers that SA programs must focus on academic needs and on providing students with meaningful and practical social and cultural preparation that can be applied during their sojourn. As previous studies have suggested, "If instructors and program coordinators can find ways to set up pre-program classes to help students feel confident and ready to tackle the challenges of SA, then we can feel we have really accomplished something meaningful that transcends beyond the classroom" (Jarman-Walsh, 2015, p. 221). That is, coordinators need to focus on students developing the academic skills needed for a new university context and the social and cultural skills

required to navigate in everyday life. Additionally, stakeholder responses echo previous research in that teachers and coordinators should foster student independence and encourage students to be active during their sojourn, which can be achieved during the pre-departure phase. As Jarman-Walsh (2015) noted, students should develop a sense of independence and the ability (or at least motivation) to actively participate in the host culture during the pre-SA phase.

The second research question explored the alignment between coordinator and student perspectives. Regarding the first theme that emerged, both partner universities and students agreed on the importance of good preparation before SA, and they tended to align in their feelings that KUFFLS prepares them well. A noticeable difference arose in expectations before the dual language program. Some students felt anxious after hearing from the SA center staff that their English language development could suffer in these European and Asian countries. Studying two foreign languages may lead to cross-linguistic challenges (Henry, 2017). However, participants in the KUFFLS dual language program have shown comparable speaking proficiency improvements to those studying in anglophone destinations, and could even outperform them due to their immersion in English as a lingua franca international communities (Humphries et al., in review). Even students in anglophone destinations have tended to immerse more easily by speaking global English with other international students who understand the difficulties with language learning, cultural adaptation and making friends (Humphries, Aubrey & King, 2023; Humphries, Ikeda & Yashima, 2023).

In the second theme, SA coordinators noted the benefits of empowering students to grasp opportunities beyond the basic mandatory courses and activities. Students tended to agree that they matured by living away from home and overcoming challenges, but they seemed to have mismatched classroom expectations. Japanese students tend to be accustomed to teacher-controlled classes, where the teacher transmits *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) knowledge in secondary-level classes (Humphries & Burns, 2015). Therefore, it can be unsettling for students to adapt to other approaches, such as communicative language teaching, where the teacher relinquishes control so that students can negotiate the language for meaning (Littlewood, 2007).

Thirdly, the coordinators mentioned the cultural uniqueness of Japan and the need to raise students' awareness about differences overseas. Students' comments supported this assertion, as many seemed surprised by issues such as safety and cleanliness. In particular, sojourners had difficulties negotiating their roles in host families. As noted by Meyer (2016), Japan is an island country with a long history and low immigration, creating a strong shared culture that reduces the need for direct low-context communication, which contrasts with the United States, which

has a shorter history founded on immigration. When students have issues and concerns but cannot speak out directly, host families will struggle to *read the air* to understand the problems.

In the fourth theme, both coordinators and students recognized the advantages of extracurricular immersion. In particular, students in Germany enjoyed activities organized in their dorms by fellow students. High engagement in extracurricular activities may lead to higher life satisfaction and increased academic engagement among Japanese SA sojourners (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). However, the students in this study indicated the time challenges when they needed to commute and balance volunteering activities with academic work. Japanese youth seem less motivated to volunteer than their international counterparts, such as those in the United States and the United Kingdom (Cabinet Office, 2019). Some research (Ikeda, 2007: Ishimoto, 2004) indicates that in Japan, while activities are labeled as "volunteering," they are often driven by external factors such as university entrance examinations and course credits rather than intrinsic motivation. This creates a fundamental tension between educational requirements and genuine volunteerism. Such instrumental motivation may influence how Japanese students allocate their time, often prioritizing academic demands over voluntary activities. Two options are possible to address this dilemma. Firstly, during SA, if host institutions offer experiential courses such as service learning in the community, students can be encouraged to select them as an alternative to an academic option. Secondly, pre-departure preparation sessions could include efforts to promote a more meaningful understanding of volunteerism and to raise social consciousness among Japanese university students.

The third research question concentrates on how this feedback can enhance the design and support of SA programs. KUFFLS students seemed comparatively well-prepared through their classes; however, Humphries and Yashima (2021) noted they have few opportunities to use the language outside class in natural contexts. Local students could benefit from more interaction with international students in Japan (Hofmeyr, 2021). In particular, the home university's international affairs division could advertise social activities, providing pre- and post-SA students opportunities to mingle with international students, boosting their knowledge about other countries and smoothening their cultural acclimatization pre-departure. International students can provide role models as independent sojourners who solve problems in new contexts; moreover, returnee senior students can provide advice about SA, focused on the most crucial aspects that young Japanese care about.

Building on the importance of social acclimatization and pre-departure preparation, another critical area for enhancement lies in the coordination and communication between host and

home institutions. While KUFFLS students are generally well-prepared, academic and social expectation inconsistencies sometimes exist. Improved communication between institutions can foster a more unified approach, helping establish clear and manageable expectations for students pre-SA and maintain open communication lines during their sojourn. However, SA managers often face significant workloads (e.g., Mammadova & Allen, 2024), which can hinder their abilities to be proactive and address individual student needs. For example, credit-transfer issues occur when courses taken during the SA are not approved by the home institution, resulting in student delays and further workload for managers. Collaborating more closely with home and host partners to ensure clear communication (as suggested by Allen, 2023) would help ensure a more seamless alignment of academic expectations, improve responsiveness to student needs during their sojourn, and reduce administrative burdens on SA managers, ultimately enhancing the overall SA experience for all stakeholders involved.

Addressing these administrative challenges through technology-based solutions could provide a way forward. Simplifying administrative tasks with digitized credit approval systems and AI-based tools for real-time issue tracking can significantly reduce the burdens on SA coordinators/managers and staff, enabling them to focus on providing personalized student support. By implementing such tools, institutions can streamline administrative processes and promote a collaborative and data-driven approach to managing SA programs. AI technology, combined with closer collaboration between home and host partners (Allen, 2023), would empower SA coordinators/managers to address individual and programmatic needs with greater precision, ultimately enhancing overall effectiveness and enriching the experience for all stakeholders.

6. Conclusion

Mobility coordinators/managers are the front line supporting students during exchanges and SA. However, their perspectives have been under-explored in the SA literature. We filled this gap by surveying 28 stakeholders from partner universities to ask them how to improve SA for Japanese students. Four themes arose: preparation, empowerment, acculturation and extracurricular activities. We triangulated partner university data with responses from a student survey, which showed areas of agreement but also the vital need to maintain communication and reflection between the home university, partners and students. This was a small-scale snapshot of students and stakeholders from SA conducted in 2023. However, the results are clear that SA is a turbulent time, pushing students through an emotional rollercoaster as they challenge and adapt to their new lives overseas. In the future, we recommend more longitudinal

research, including studies capturing students' adaptation post-SA.

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