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Benefits of Intercultural Contact : What students obtain through the experience of studying abroad

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要旨

ユネスコ等の統計によると、2003年現在で海外の高等教育機関に在籍している日本人学生は7,600人以上を数えた。しかし、他国に比べて我が国の水準は十分とは言えず、2003年末に中央教育審議会より「グローバル化した社会で活躍できる人材を育成するため」日本人学生の海外留学を積極的に促す答申が提出された。

海外留学とは、まさに異文化接触に他ならない。異なる文化の中で生活することにより、富山大学の学生は何を学び、何を感じ、何を考え、何を得たのか、留学経験のある学生とのインタビューを通して調べた。さらに、留学経験は答申が期待するように「国際的な視野を持った人材の育成」に寄与するのかを考察した。

1. Introduction (Purpose and Background)

The purpose of this study is to investigate what benefits Japanese students obtained through the experience of studying abroad. I will also examine the question of whether studying abroad can develop a talent for obtaining a cosmopolitan outlook.

A Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology submitted a report on the issue of Japanese students studying abroad at a conference at the end of 2003. In this report, they pointed out that Japanese students should receive more support for opportunities to study abroad. The Japanese government expects the Japanese younger generation to be more international in thinking in order for the Japanese

people to become citizens of the world through the student experience of living in a different culture.

Statistics show that students studying overseas have been increasing in recent years. By the reference¹, the studying abroad population in 1993 was nearly 40,000 but by 2003 it was over 76,000. Nevertheless, this number is still too low and is not acceptable to the government.

The University of Toyama offers scholarship exchange student programs to study abroad at several universities through an agreement with the University of Toyama. However, the number of students per year who get this opportunity is extremely low (2~3 students); accordingly most of Japanese students go abroad to study at their own expense. Although the university requires that the students who stay in foreign countries must notify their faculty, not all students comply. This is especially true of students who stay overseas to learn a language during vacation periods. As a result, the university does not know the exact number of students studying overseas at their own expense.

One of the services of the Advisory Division of International Student Center of the University of Toyama is to provide Japanese students with consultations and information about studying abroad, which undoubtedly takes time and money. Therefore, not every Japanese has the opportunity. A considerable number of students have to abandon their dreams because of a lack of financial means. The number of the students that visited the division for consulting from April 2006 to March 2007 was 19. I cannot tell how many of those students we were able to see their plan become a reality. Only a few students came to me to report on their experience in a foreign country. All of them went abroad to learn a language in a language school or university extension courses because their language abilities were not sufficient to pursue a course in some specialty at a university.

2. Methods

In 2002, I asked 5 students to participate in a study and had a round-table discussion on the theme of "My Evaluation of my Overseas Study Experience". (See the Journal of International Student Center, Toyama University, 2003, pp25-32) I had interesting results from this precious study to compare to. Taking this opportunity, I had continued to investigate what the Japanese students obtained through their studying abroad experience. I gathered data from one-on-one interviews with 7 students. Some stories of their living overseas experience appeared in the International Student Center News that is published twice a year.

The scope of this study was limited to 7 students with overseas living experience that are/were studying at the Gofuku Campus², of the University of Toyama.

Distribution of Interviewee

		Length of stay	Country of study
Males	A	3 months/1 year	USA/South Korea
	B	1 year	England
Females	C	3 weeks	Australia
	D	1 month/1 year	New Zealand/New Zealand
	E	1 month	New Zealand
	F	16 days	Ireland
	G	1 year	Canada

3. Results and Discussion

The advantages of studying abroad that the 7 students mentioned were almost the same as those that the 5 students mentioned in the 2002 study.

According to the study in 2002, the major advantages gained from their study abroad were :

- 1--- improved self-confidence
- 2--- increased mental development
- 3--- developing a global point of view

According to the interviews with the 7 students in my current study, the major advantages gained from their study abroad were :

- 1--- improved self-confidence
- 2--- developing a global point of view
- 3--- a more acute awareness of the mother country, Japan

These 7 students stayed in a foreign country in order to learn a language. The students who stayed overseas for one year made a self-appraisal of their progress in that language. They accomplished their purpose. The students that stayed for less than a year understood that they did not have very much improvement in the studied language but that did not disappoint them. They did not expect to significantly improve their language skills in such a short term.

Studying abroad forces one to being exposed to a different culture. All interviewees recognized that they obtained fruitful results beyond improvement in their language skills through intercultural communication in a foreign culture. They believed that the experience of living overseas became an ongoing guiding principle in their lives. The results of the 2002

study mentioned self-confidence as one of the biggest advantages gained from the study abroad. The 7 interviewees stated that they gained this self-confidence by having to be self-reliant through solving various problems on their own with minimal assistance.

Next to self-confidence, a global point of view was seen as a very important advantage. They regarded themselves as having widened their view of mental vision by meeting not only the local people but also people from various parts of the world that they met in the language schools. They also realized that the common sense of Japan is not the common sense of the world. The Japanese believe that "Silence is golden". Along that line, they do not like to express themselves with direct discussion. They always try to deal with problems peacefully and try to avoid debate, while people, especially in English-speaking countries, are quite vocal with their opinions. The Japanese method can be regarded as acceptance of morally unjust rules or situations without speaking out against them because of fear they will be condemned or criticized by their peers. This type of action can be considered as irresponsible in other cultures. The Japanese manner works well in Japan but it sometimes brings misunderstanding in other cultures.

The students were awakened to the fact of how much they had been indifferent and had not really known how the Japanese culture was viewed by the outside world. Some students found many excellent attributes of Japanese culture and appreciated that they were born here. One of them related that he was happy being a Japanese when he was traveling in several countries of Europe during his stay overseas. When he visited some Eastern European countries, he received a big shock as he viewed the many street children wearing torn T-shirts in the freezing January weather. On one hand he was often surrounded by children begging for small change; on the other, the rich people, to all appearances, were oblivious to their surroundings. When he faced this reality, he mediated on the peace differences between his Japan and other nations afresh. Some students have a question about Japanese life style because they spent time with a thrifty and sound host family. They criticized those Japanese people that live in the lap of too much luxury and waste too many things. They noted that many young people in Japan wear brand-name goods such as CHANEL and LOUIS VUITTON and thought that this life style is quite crazy. They were ashamed of the life style of their fellow Japanese.

In addition to the above observations, the students stated that they became more assertive, active, tolerant and patient; and they became less discouraged by small obstacles. Two of the students formulated a new direction for the future by their stay overseas. Below, I have summarized the subject matter of the interviews with them.

A: I was tired of taking courses. Classes were boring because I had no specific aim in life at that time. I was wondering what I wanted to do most. The answer was that I wanted to

learn English. I had been wishful for visiting England since my childhood. I decided to learn English there. As I made great progress with my English, I am satisfied with my experience. I reaped a rich harvest from my stay in England. These include self-confidence, aggressiveness and a cosmopolitan outlook. I noticed the necessity of debate. Above all, I am so happy to find my future career. I couldn't see my goal before going to England and I was not interested in studying at university. The lack of direction in my life was stressful. I have my goal now and I am enjoying studying at university. I think if I hadn't gone to England, I would not have found my future career. I am very satisfied with my studies abroad.

B: I had never gone overseas before entering university. While I was at university, I had a work experience in the USA for 3 months and had a chance to study in South Korea as an exchange student. Through these experiences, I have been hoping to work for the UN. For that reason I decided to study International Relations at a graduate school in the USA. I studied English to get a acceptable TOEFL score but I didn't succeed. Instead, I got a chance to study at a graduate school in Ibaraki Prefecture. I will specialize in North Korea and if possible, I would like to go to a graduate school in the USA to study as an exchange student. I will continue learning English to improve my TOEFL score.

Student A occasionally visits my office to let me know how he has been getting along. He always looks to be pleasant and lively. He is now a young man full of drive. He told me that he is getting ready to obtain the qualifications for a certain job. Student B is a graduate student at present. Before leaving Toyama, he visited me to say thank you and promised to contact me if he works for the UN. I am looking forward to getting the news.

Studying abroad has few disadvantages for students if they can return home safely. No one referred to a disadvantage of living in a different culture to study despite the fact that they had some unhappy experiences once in a while. Ordeals and adversities can be essential if the students are to become more mature and more tough-minded.

4. Conclusions

So far as the students of the University of Toyama are concerned, the experience studying overseas should be fruitful, beneficial and meaningful.

Many students in rural areas like Toyama prefecture, having little or no contact with people outside their own circle, lack a certain vitality. They sometimes seem naïve. Therefore, they need to go out to see more of the world to expand their knowledge. Students with experience living overseas look to be mentally tough and they say that study abroad contributes to encouraging a person to develop a cosmopolitan outlook.

The interviewees are completely satisfied with their experience in a different culture. They feel it is helpful for their social development and recommended that other students should live in a different culture 'alone' to become more mature and more cosmopolitan. Nevertheless, it is not as simple to go abroad as it is imagined. Not all students can study abroad without qualification whenever they want to. If students plan to study abroad, there are some problems they need to solve. One is expense. It is difficult to put an overseas study plan into practice while students have limited funds. To increase the number of students overseas, an economic support system for students studying overseas at their own expense would be necessary. Interest free student loans should be made available from the university to qualified students. They would be required to pay back the loan with small monthly payments. This would promote studying abroad.

Notes

- 1 The annual of UNESCO and the like.
- 2 The campus of the University of Toyama is divided into three after integrating with two universities in Toyama prefecture in 2005.

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