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# The impact of COVID-19 on Japan In Today's World (JTW) Lessons for future teaching and learning

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Japan In Today's World (JTW) has a significant link to Kyushu University's KIKAN education. As the University's representative, English-taught study program for exchange students from its leading partner institutions around the world, JTW serves as an integral part of the KIKAN education curriculum and uniquely contributes to pursuing its overarching missions of nurturing students' cross-cultural competencies through diverse courses in general education. Our current era is marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented public health crisis that has constrained nearly all aspects of social activities around the world. Drawing on original data gathered through a program evaluation survey ( $n=22$ ) and a series of Focus Group interviews ( $n=12$ ), this article first overviews the ways in which the ongoing global public health crisis has affected the operation of JTW, particularly from April through July 2020, and the learning experiences of its participants. Based on the findings from analyzing those data, this article then discusses, albeit preliminarily, key lessons for its continuous, effective operation in a "post-pandemic age" to come. Those lessons are found in three areas that are essential components of the program: lessons for (1) the JTW core courses; (2) student-to-student cross-cultural exchange; and (3) immersion experience activities. These lessons may also serve as a potentially valuable source of knowledge to further strengthen the role of KIKAN education in coming years.

## 1. Introduction: Japan In Today's World, KIKAN Education and COVID-19

Japan In Today's World (JTW, hereafter) is a Kyushu University study program for international students, aiming to help them understand Japanese society and culture in our ever-changing world. As a year-long, English-taught program, it annually hosts an average of about 50 exchange student participants from the University's leading partner institutions around the world. JTW has played a pivotal role in helping the University to pursue the core missions of KIKAN education, which aim in part to nurture next generations of leaders in industry, government, and academia through rigorous general educations with a stated emphasis on cross-cultural learning. First, all JTW core courses – a set of content courses developed originally just for program participants – are offered to all students across campuses, both domestic and international, as part of the regular KIKAN education curriculum. Also, many extra-curricular activities and programming that JTW regularly carries out for its own participants' experiential learning have also provided non-JTW students with rich resources and opportunities to nurture or continue honing their cross-cultural competencies through helping, studying together and engaging in cross-cultural exchange with those international students.

This paper discusses the impact of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus infectious disease – COVID-19, hereafter – on the operation of the JTW program and the participants' daily experience mainly from April through July 2020. The World Health Organization officially announced on March 11, 2020, its classification of the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic, and in response the Abe Administration of the Japanese Government

declared a nationwide state of emergency on April 16.<sup>1</sup>Under the state of emergency, nearly all higher education institutions across the country were required to develop and implement a variety of countermeasures to prevent further spread of the infection, including suspending student international mobility, both inbound and outbound, and moving daily teaching and research activities from onsite to online as a way to strictly observe social distancing. JTW is not an exception; the persistent pandemic has profoundly affected nearly all aspects of the participants' living and learning experiences.

The goal of this paper is to draw lessons for the continued successful operation of JTW as a study program representing Kyushu University's wider efforts for international education, including its core courses that serve as a unique component of the KIKAN education curriculum. Lessons for the future of JTW may also offer a significant reference for other courses and related teaching activities of KIKAN education to continue thriving in a "post-pandemic age" to come.

## 2. Methods and data

The discussion in this paper is based largely on original data drawn from two sets of sources: JTW's end-of-year program evaluation survey and three sets of Focus Group interviews with program participants. The program evaluation survey was conducted on July 20, 2020, shortly before the official closing of the program's 26<sup>th</sup> cycle, which started in October 2019 and ended in July 2020. This was done online using Google Form, and the 22 respondents were program participants who remained to the end and completed JTW for this program year as originally scheduled. Table 1 below lists basic individual characteristics of those survey respondents, including their age, gender, nationality, and home institutions.

The Focus Group interview was conducted three times during the time period from July 3 to 18, 2020. For each interview session, four program participants were recruited on a voluntary basis. Each session included both men and women from diverse home institutions located in different regions of the world. All sessions were conducted online using Zoom and lasted about two hours. The goal of these interviews was to uncover, in an open-ended and in-depth manner, how the participants felt about the impact of the pandemic on their day-to-day learning and living experience. Table 1 also indicates which program participants joined these interview sessions.

Table 1 Individual characteristics of the respondents of JTW program evaluation survey and Focus Group interviews

	Age*1	Gender*2	Nationality	Home Institution	FG*3
Student 1	22	M	American	U. of Georgia	FG Group 1
Student 2	19	M	American	Arizona State U.	FG Group 2
Student 3	21	M	British	Newcastle U.	
Student 4	21	F	French	SOAS, U. of London	FG Group 1
Student 5	21	F	British	U. of Sheffield	
Student 6	21	F	British	U. of Leeds	FG Group 3
Student 7	21	F	British	U. of Leeds	FG Group 1
Student 8	21	F	British	U. of Leeds	

Student 9	32	F	French	Bordeaux Montaigne U.	
Student 10	21	F	French	Bordeaux Montaigne U.	FG Group 3
Student 11	21	M	French	Bordeaux Montaigne U.	
Student 12	24	F	French	Bordeaux Montaigne U.	
Student 13	22	F	French	U. Grenoble Alpes	FG Group 1
Student 14	27	M	French	U. of Strasbourg	FG Group 3
Student 15	25	M	German	Ludwig Maximilian U. of Munich	
Student 16	28	M	Austrian	Heidelberg U.	FG Group 2
Student 17	24	F	Swedish	Stockholm U.	FG Group 2
Student 18	53	F	German	U. of Iceland	
Student 19	21	M	Australian	U. of Queensland	FG Group 2
Student 20	23	F	Taiwanese	National Taiwan U.	
Student 21	23	M	Taiwanese	National Tsing Hua U.	FG Group 3
Student 22	23	M	Taiwanese	National Tsing Hua U.	

\*1, Median = 22 years old, mean – 24.3 years old

\*2, Gender ratio = M1.0 : F1.2

\*3, FG = Focus Group interviews

### 3. Japan In Today's World: An overview

Since its launch in 1994, JTW has served as Kyushu University's representative study program aiming in part to activate and continue strengthening the University's institutional partnership with leading universities around the world through university-wide student exchange agreements. While designed primarily as a one-year program, starting in October and ending in July the following year, JTW also accepts participants for only one semester, either Fall-Winter (Oct.-Feb.) or Spring-Summer (Apr.-Jul.) semester. Based at the main campus (Ito Campus since 2015), JTW is coordinated by faculty members of the University's International Student Center with administrative assistance from the Division of International Affairs.<sup>2</sup> Over the past 10 years, annually about 50 exchange students have participated in JTW over the course of the program year. Typically, participants are from more than 20 different home institutions located in more than 15 different countries across major contents around the world.

Toward the program mission to help international students learn and understand Japan in today's world, the program is designed to offer its participants a package of comprehensive learning-and-living experiences based on a multi-dimensional approach, including academic and experiential, with various integral components for cross-cultural exchange.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 below illustrates the design and main contents of the JTW program. For academic learning for credit, as one of the program's featured contents, JTW offers a series of JTW core courses, which are a set of multidisciplinary content courses about characteristics, current issues, and historical developments of Japanese society and culture. These courses are instructed by both JTW faculty coordinators and faculty members affiliated with other units of the University. JTW's academic learning also includes opportunities to engage in independent study projects, and the program also permits its participants, should they be interested, to enroll in some regular faculty courses: English-taught courses offered by specific faculties

or schools at Kyushu University outside the arrangement of the JTW program. JTW participants are also eligible to enroll in Japanese Academic Courses (JACs) to start learning or continue developing their proficiency in the Japanese language. For effective experiential learning through intensive cultural immersion, it also arranges and offers opportunities to participate in a series of field study trips, which are conducted roughly on a once-a-month basis, a student tutor program, Japanese conversation partner program, and home visit program.<sup>2</sup>

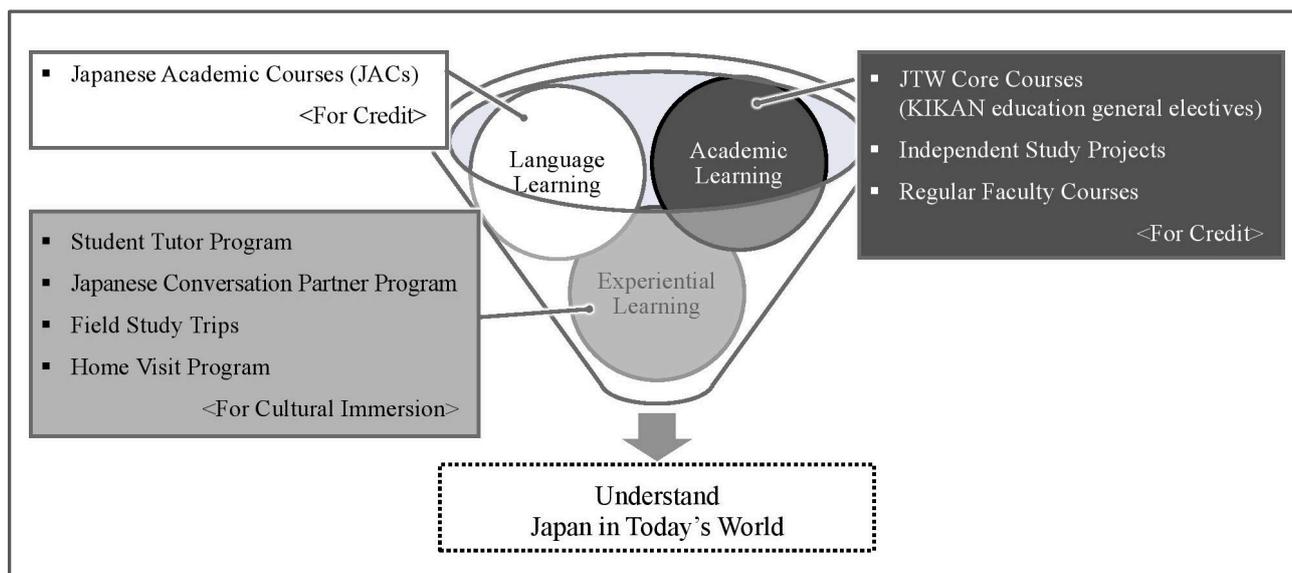


Figure 1 Design and components of the JTW program as a comprehensive study program

Domestic, non-JTW students may enroll in the JTW core courses to study with the program participants, and they may also join the student tutor program and Japanese conversation partner program to regularly interact with, support, and study with JTW participants to gain cross-cultural exchange experience both on and off campus. For the home visit program, JTW matches each JTW participant and a local family in Fukuoka City to provide opportunities for both parties to experience cross-cultural communication and interactions on a regular basis.

#### 4. The impact of COVID-19 on the JTW program

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the operation of and the participants' living and learning experience of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of the JTW program, which started in October 2019 and ended in July 2020. As with all the previous annual JTW cycles, this one consisted of three groups of participants: those admitted to the program for one-year participation; those for the fall-winter semester only; and those for the spring-summer semester only. What follows discusses the impact of COVID-19 on three main areas essential to the JTW

program's operation: student enrollment; delivery of core courses; and other program activities for cross-cultural exchange.

#### 4.1. Student enrollment in the program

First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced the number of JTW participants over the course of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle. In recent years, the program has typically hosted an annual average of around 50 participants altogether including both those who participate for the full year and those who come for only a semester. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of JTW started in October 2019 with a total of 38 participants, 29 of whom had applied for one-year program participation and nine who enrolled for the fall-winter semester only. By mid-February 2020, those nine semester-only students had completed their program participation and returned to their home institutions as originally scheduled. By the same time, an additional 14 participants were officially scheduled to join JTW from the beginning of April for participation in the spring-summer semester only. The program therefore had prepared for hosting a total of 43 participants for the spring-summer semester by securing their dormitory rooms, arranging shuttle bus services to pick them up from the airport, and recruiting a sufficient number of domestic students who would serve as student tutors and Japanese conversation partners. Enough local families were also recruited to serve as host families for the home visit program.

By March, however, every one of the prospective participants for the spring-summer semester had decided to cancel their program participation before leaving their home countries. Many of them were required by their home universities to do so at least for this semester; some of them requested of both their home universities and the JTW program not to entirely cancel their enrollment but to simply postpone their participation to the fall-winter semester of the 27<sup>th</sup> cycle of the program (beginning in October 2020) or to the next spring-summer semester (beginning in April 2021).

Simultaneously, an increasing number of those who had enrolled for one-year participation exited the JTW program during the semester break, from February through March 2020, or even after the spring-summer semester started in April. Chief reasons behind their program withdrawal include personal choice in response to daunting health concerns, and either an official requirement or strong pressure from their home institutions to withdraw from further participation in the program in light of the risks and unknowns of the pandemic. As a result, a total of seven of the one-year participants withdrew from the program and returned to their home countries. Thus, by the beginning of July 2020, the last month of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of JTW, only 22 participants remained in the program (Figure 2). This was the lowest enrollment at least in the past 20 years of the program's history.

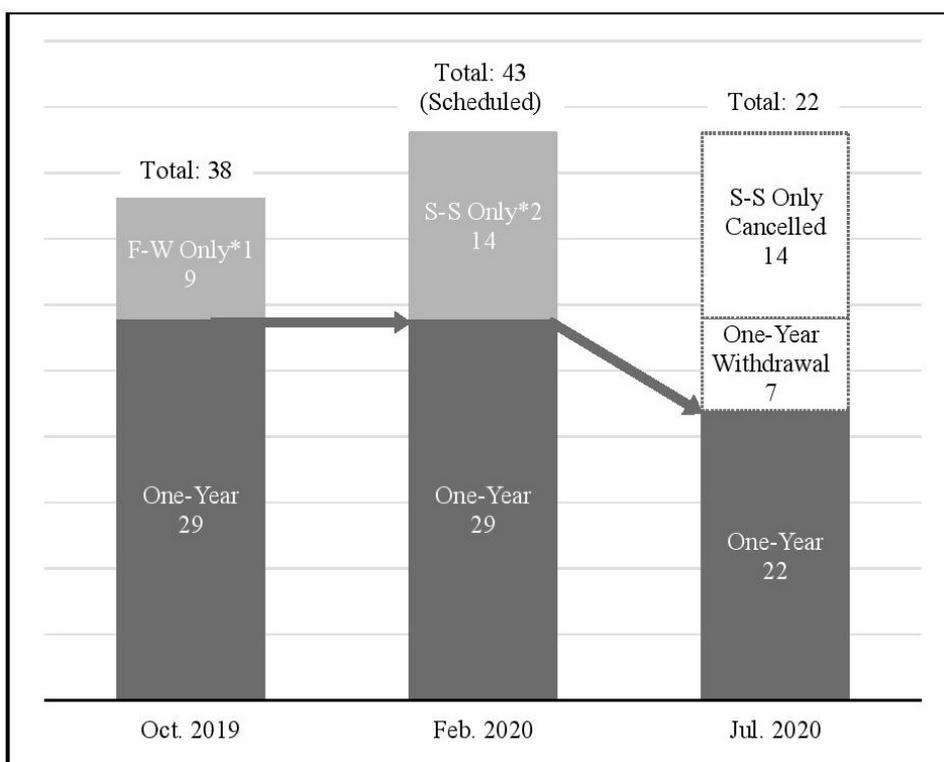


Figure 2 Trend of JTW enrollment, Oct. 2019 – Jul. 2020, the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle

\*1, The number of program participants only for the fall-winter semester of the JTW 26<sup>th</sup> cycle.

\*2, The number of program participants who were admitted to the program only for the spring-summer semester of the JTW 26<sup>th</sup> cycle.

#### 4.2. Delivery of the JTW core courses (KIKAN education general electives)

In compliance with decisions made by the University’s COVID-19 Countermeasure Committee, from the beginning of the spring-summer semester the JTW program began to move all core course instruction online. As required by the program’s policy, each of the 22 remaining program participants enrolled in at least one JTW core course. All of them participated in the class sessions online, connecting with instructors and classmates via Kyushu Moodle and Zoom from their dormitory rooms on Ito Campus. However, three of the participants participated online from their home countries as they were prohibited from traveling back to Japan after leaving during the semester break. Table 2, below, lists all the JTW core courses offered online for the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of JTW during the spring-summer semester.

Table 2 JTW core course offerings for the spring-summer semester of 26<sup>th</sup> cycle

	Course Title (Alphabetical Order)	Instructor's Affiliation	Number of JTW Enrollment	Number of Non-JTW Enrollment
1.	Ageing & the Life Course in Japan	ISC*	7	3
2.	Contemporary Japanese Literature	Fukuoka U.	5	0
3.	Contemporary Japanese Politics	Law	7	2
4.	Cool Japan Strategy	Law	8	3
5.	Diversity & Minorities in Japan	ISC	5	4
6.	Gender & Sexuality in Today's Japan	ISC	11	0
7.	International & Multicultural Education in Japan	ISC	7	2
8.	Introduction to International Finance	Economics	11	2
9.	Japanese Economy in Transition	ISC	3	1
10.	Language & Society in Japan	KIKAN	13	4
11.	Local Production in Kyushu	Fukuoka U.	3	2
12.	Modern History of Japan II	ISC	4	3
13.	Value & Spirituality in Japan	ISC	9	2

\*ISC = Kyushu University International Student Center

### 4.3. Other JTW components for extra-curricular, cross-cultural exchange

As mentioned earlier, beyond the classroom the JTW program arranges opportunities for program participants to experience cross-cultural interactions with the local population. Those opportunities are provided primarily through a student tutor program and Japanese conversation partner program with Kyushu University's domestic students and a home visit program with local families in Fukuoka City. Non-JTW students and local residents also benefit from participating in these opportunities to experience cross-cultural exchange. However, in compliance with University-wide COVID-19 countermeasures, JTW requested that the participants of these programs minimize, if not fully avoid, face-to-face interaction. All the participants were instructed to maintain their communication via whatever online platform they felt would work best for their interactions.

## 5. JTW participants' perspectives: Surveys and interviews

### 5.1. Overall feedback to the JTW program

What did the remaining 22 members of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of JTW think about their overall experience of studying at Kyushu University through the program? In general, the participants unanimously reported a positive response not only to the program's role in supporting their learning experience as international students; they also expressed their appreciation of the program's contribution to helping them maintain their health and

wellbeing during their program participation amid the global outbreak of COVID-19.

Figure 3 below summarizes students' responses to one of the Likert scale questions in the end-of-year program evaluation survey, which asked participants to respond to the statement, "I have greatly enjoyed the JTW program overall," by choosing one answer out of five options consisting of "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Neutral," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree." All 22 respondents reported that they either strongly agreed or simply agreed with this statement; 16 of them (about 73%) picked the answer option of "Strongly agree."

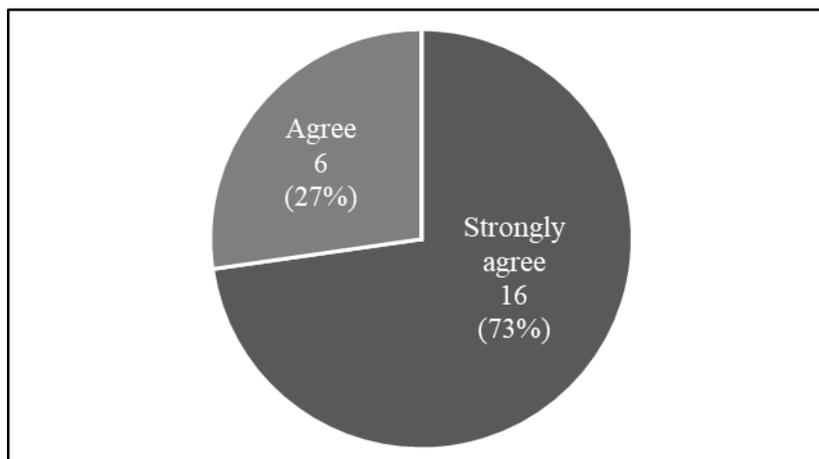


Figure 3 Response to survey question: "I have greatly enjoyed the JTW PROGRAM OVERALL." ( $n=22$ )

Focus Group interviews were instrumental in revealing main reasons behind this overwhelmingly positive response regarding the participants' experience with the JTW program as a whole. Through all three Focus Group interview sessions, most participants shared and expressed their struggles with continuing to pursue their academic objectives, particularly during the spring-summer semester, as they had originally planned. Some participants even expressed deep disappointment with the gap between "dreams" and "reality" – a void between how they desired to spend their spring-summer semester and how hard the global public health crisis made it for them to pursue those goals. While holding these negative views towards the pandemic-caused conditions outside their personal control, most participants felt that JTW remained resilient in continuing to support their personal wellbeing as well as their academic experience. For instance, one participant stated as follows:

I think JTW worked very hard to keep us here safe and give us the best experience possible despite the circumstances which I really appreciate... JTW faculty coordinators and administrative staff members regularly provided advice and support and shared information of the development of the pandemic and provided guidance for stimulus checks so on...[We] can't thank you all enough for that.

## 5.2. Experience with the JTW core courses (KIKAN education general electives)

While showing a unanimously positive view of the JTW program as a whole, the results of the survey and Focus Group interviews suggest a few areas for improvement when focusing on the participants' experience of learning with the JTW core courses, which were all delivered online during the spring-summer semester.

The survey included a statement, "I have learned a lot of valuable knowledge from the JTW CORE COURSE(S) in which I enrolled," to which participants were asked to answer about the specific core courses in which they enrolled. As illustrated by Figure 4 below, while no participants answered this question by choosing the "Strongly disagree" option, four and three of them answered "Neutral" and "Disagree," respectively, indicating that a substantial portion of the participants did not find their learning experience with the JTW core courses effective in contributing to achieving a meaningful learning experience.

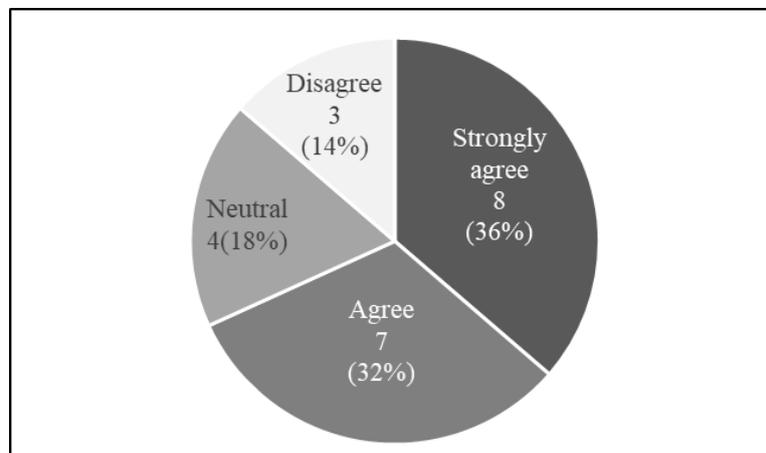


Figure 4 Response to survey question: "I have learned a lot of valuable knowledge from the JTW CORE COURSE(S) in which I enrolled."  
(n=22)

As the results of the Focus Group interviews clearly reveal, the quality of the participants' learning experience with the core courses varies significantly, not by the participants, but depending mainly on the specific courses in which they enrolled. Most of those who expressed frustration with their JTW core courses argued that they felt awkward or uncomfortable with the ways in which their class sessions were conducted online over Zoom. Representing this experience, one participant shared with the rest of his Focus Group members his view as follows:

I understand that they [the instructors] tried their best to teach us as effectively and meaningfully for us as they could. But, it's painfully obvious pretty much through the end of the semester that they

struggled with mastering Zoom's some basic functions that we are very familiar with. We had hard time keeping ourselves engaged in what's being discussed in class because of this...

Most of the Focus Group interview participants also admitted that they themselves were still learning how to meaningfully participate in a Zoom session for the purpose of an academic class. Before taking these courses, they hadn't felt hesitant to use Zoom especially in small, casual and personal settings. In a formal class setting, however, most of them felt confused or disoriented as to how to learn together with their classmates remotely or to have a feeling that their presence in the virtual classroom mattered to others including the instructors. During an in-depth group discussion about the fundamental cause of some instructors' difficulties in effectively conducting online live class sessions, one participant explained her view as follows:

I think the real trouble is that the teachers tried hard to teach us online the way they used to do normally [onsite], before the pandemic. I don't think this works, though. To me, at least, learning things onsite, in a real classroom, is one thing, and online learning is another, and you just can't bring everything you do onsite and the way you do it into the online world. Maybe, can I say, a big shift in their [the instructors'] mentality is necessary...[so that] they can figure out and feature in their teaching what they can teach the best and how to do it more effectively uniquely online...

### 5.3. Other JTW components for extra-curricular, cross-cultural exchange

Another key area calling for improvement is found in the components of the JTW program which aim to facilitate cross-cultural exchange experience as extra-curricular activities, primarily between JTW participants and local Japanese people, including non-JTW students and host families. Participants' experience of these opportunities is crucial not only to JTW's program missions on behalf the participants; arguably, these are also valuable resources for the local Japanese participants to nurture their own cross-cultural competencies.

Figure 5 below summarizes the survey results pertaining to the participants' experiences with the student tutor program, Japanese conversation partner program, and home visit program, respectively. For each Likert scale question asking whether each program was helpful in deepening the participants' understanding of Japanese society and culture, a sizable portion of the participants chose "Disagree" or even "Strongly disagree" (Figure 5). This indicates that a large share of the participants were not satisfied with these essential components of the JTW program, particularly when also taking into account the number of participants who chose the "Neutral" answer option.

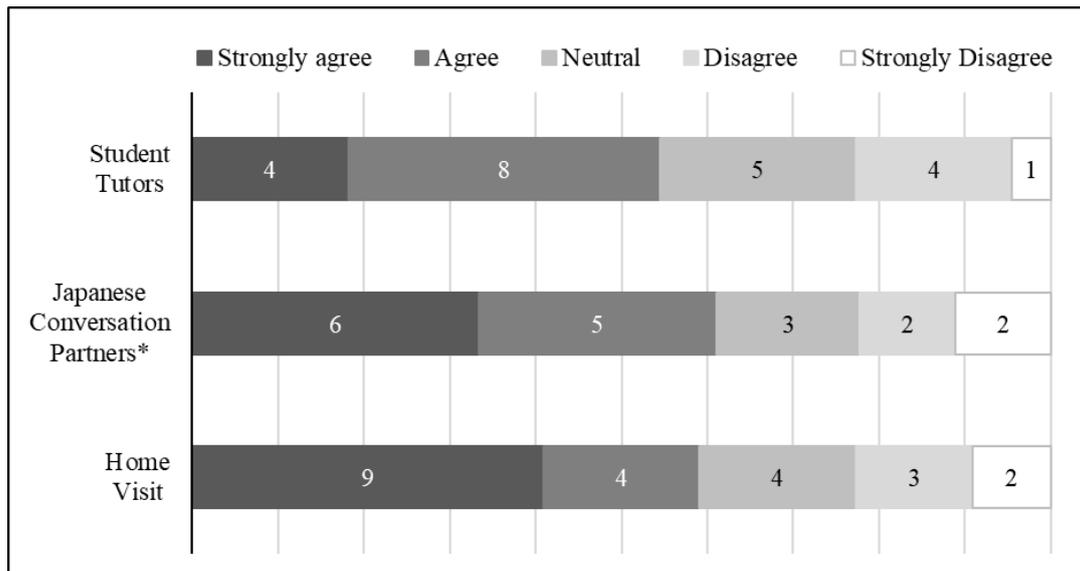


Figure 5 Responses to survey questions: “These Programs Were Helpful for My Learning of Japanese Society and Culture.” ( $n=22$ )

\* Participation in these programs is optional. While all the 22 students participated in the student tutor program and home visit program, the Japanese conversation partner program had 18 participants.

Focus Group interviews helped to delve into how the participants felt about their experiences with these programs and were instrumental in explaining why a sizable share of them did not choose the “Strongly agree” or “Agree” answer option in the survey for any of these programs. Across the three separate sessions of Focus Group interviews, most participants expressed that they enjoyed and deeply appreciated their activity partners – their tutors, conversation partners and host families. Simultaneously though, almost all participants shared with their Focus Group members their deep disappointment at what they felt to be the rather abrupt halt in their partners’ communication with them from early April, when Fukuoka Prefecture was first included in the national government’s declaration of a state of emergency. Most of those who chose the “Strongly agree” or “Agree” answer options in the survey did so based on the memories of their positive experiences of these programs during the previous, fall-winter semester. Nearly all the rest selected neutral or negative responses to express how they felt about their experience overall at the time of conducting these Focus Group interviews, near the closing of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of the JTW program. No participants expressed a sense of resentment or animosity to any of their activity partners; rather, many of them explained that they felt somewhat “abandoned” by these Japanese friends of theirs and thus confused as to how to make sense of this seemingly sad way in which their relationships dissolved. For instance, one participant expressed her thoughts and sentiments as follows:

I have an intensively mixed feeling about my tutor, Japanese conversation partner and host family.

They were all so very nice and helpful for me at the beginning...So wonderful during the first semester that I just assumed that our relationships would continue this way through the next semester [spring-summer semester]. But, it felt like they suddenly stop calling me or even email me. I guess they just didn't know what to do with me under the circumstance. Maybe, they were bit panicky and freaked out because I am Gaijin, who [they thought] are responsible or bringing the virus into this country?

In summary, the results of both the end-of-year program evaluation survey and Focus Group interviews suggest that all of the participants who retained their enrollment and participation through to the completion of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of JTW, left with a positive view of the program overall. To be accurate, it can be argued that they were content with how the program aimed to help them endure and even still to flourish in these unprecedented, unusual times affected by the global public health crisis. The results of the survey and interviews together suggest, however, that the health crisis caught the program largely unprepared; specific components of the program, including the JTW core courses and extra-curricular, cross-cultural exchange activities failed to fully fulfill their promises, due at least in part to the unfamiliarity with effective online communication on the side of the hosts of the JTW participants, including some core course instructors and partners in their extra-curricular activities.

## 6. Discussions: Lessons for JTW in a “post-pandemic age”

Today's world is on the verge of a “post-pandemic age,” and higher education is not an exception in this global context.<sup>3</sup> An urge for adjusting to this new socio-cultural and technological milieu is particularly immense for international education, including the JTW program, which holds the practice of student exchange and the facilitation of cross-cultural learning as its core mission.<sup>4</sup>

What then does a “post-pandemic age” mean to higher education at large and international education in particular? From instructors' point of view, it signifies a ceaseless and bold search for ways to provide for students impactful learning experience without being constrained by either the physical infrastructures or the conceptual foundations that have long framed traditional onsite teaching.<sup>5</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed at least two experiences on higher education institutions around the world: a forced, collective experiment with online instruction and a permanent, lurking sense of vulnerability due to the possible surge of another global health crisis such as the current pandemic that may hit us at any point in the future. Together, the coming of a “post-pandemic age” has already placed higher education institutions around the world under pressure to prepare for normalizing, rather than temporarily managing, the daily practice of remotely instructing, mentoring and supporting students.<sup>4</sup> Such pressure not only requires swift adoption of knowledge and skills necessary to deliver academic learning experiences online; it also demands an ever-proactive search for and acquisition of strategies and methods to help students, those participating in international education in particular, to have more impactful learning experiences than ever before in order for universities and specific

programs to continue thriving.<sup>6</sup>

Against the backdrop of these developing views of the future prospects of higher education, what lessons could be drawn from the experiences of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of JTW, first for this program's own future teaching and learning? Then, what implications from the lessons for JTW could be applied to the future of KIKAN education? What follows discusses, albeit preliminarily, three main areas of lessons to be addressed for the future operation of the JTW program in a "post-pandemic age": lessons for (1) the JTW core courses; (2) student-to-student cross-cultural exchange; and (3) activities for immersion experience.

### **6.1. For JTW core courses – Offer training in online teaching and actively adopt PBL and TBL**

As evident from the end-of-year program survey and Focus Group interviews, the first lesson for the future delivery of JTW core courses is to offer systematic and effective training for all the core course instructors to improve, or continue advancing, their skills and knowledge necessary to teach online more smoothly and effectively than they did today. Since JTW participants are "short-term students," exchange students, who enroll in the program only for up to a year, in principle, the so-called hybrid teaching – a method whereby class activities are conducted variously both onsite and online over the course period<sup>6</sup> – is not likely to be a recommendable teaching style to pursue because students may either live on campus or stay in their home country during their study period.

Instead, the primary goal for this instructor training should be to support them in developing a set of skills and methods for conducting classes fully online. This is the case because international education in a "post-pandemic age," particularly that for international students, will likely meet in the coming years a growing demand for remote teaching, often while students stay in their home countries. For this purpose, JTW core course instructors would first benefit greatly from actively participating in university-provided workshops aiming to improve their knowledge and skills for effective use of Moodle, Zoom and other tools for effective online teaching. It would also be beneficial for them to actively share knowledge and experience among themselves, not only on this campus but also with instructors at other institutions both domestically and abroad, about what they find as to be good practices of in the use of those tools.

Another important lesson is drawn from a remark made during one of the Focus Group interview sessions, which was discussed earlier. Rather than trying to teach online in the same way they teach onsite, one participant suggested, instructors should feature and take advantage of strengths uniquely associated with online teaching at the heart of each online class session. One way to put this suggestion into action is to actively adopt project-based learning (PBL) and team-based learning (TBL) as a core component of their courses. Quality of students' learning experiences should improve to some degree once their instructors grow more masterful in delivering online instruction. However, to fully take advantage of attending and participating in a virtual classroom, students should be provided more frequent opportunities to learn by themselves and together with classmates.

Active integration of PBL and TBL into the core learning activities of JTW core courses will likely help

students to feel more focused on the class subjects, more closely connected to their classmates, and thus more engaged in their learning. It should also be noted that active use of these methods could contribute to facilitating cross-cultural learning experiences between JTW participants and non-JTW students, including Japanese students, because the setting of a “virtual class” may help some of them reduce anxiety related to possible miscommunication because of the physical distances.<sup>6</sup> It’s worthwhile to consider pursuing this approach, in part because of a well-noted, high proficiency in ICT often held among the younger population today.<sup>7</sup> Relying upon the advanced ICT proficiency that program participants are likely to bring to the virtual classroom, JTW core course instructors should rather encourage them to actively take initiative to learn their subjects through these learning methods.

## **6.2. For student-to-student cross-cultural exchange – Encourage and support students’ initiatives**

The earlier discussion also made it clear that the unprecedented public health crisis abruptly disrupted the interaction and communication between the JTW participants and their students tutors and Japanese conversation partners. The strict countermeasure of social distancing, including a strong call to avoid face-to-face interactions, was among the main factors for paralyzing the active cross-cultural exchange between the two parties. Also, arguably, the Japanese partners in these activities – tutors and conversation partners – must have been too busy to maintain the level of activeness in their connections with the JTW partners as they were overwhelmed with their own sudden adjustment to the shift to online learning for their own coursework.

One lesson that may be drawn from this experience is based on the above-mentioned value and importance of supporting students to take initiatives for their own activities. As program participants frequently express during the Focus Group interviews, these opportunities for extra-curricular, cross-cultural exchange are an essential component of the program, not only as a motivating factor for their initial application to the program, but also for their continued engagement in their daily student life throughout their program participation period. Both the student tutor and Japanese conversation partner program, therefore, must continue to be offered to future participants in the “post-pandemic age” to come.

As already discussed above, many of today’s university students are largely already competent in the “new generation of digital technologies,” already masterful in using, even creatively and effectively, a variety of ICT tools that may enhance the quality of their cross-cultural exchange activities regardless of the geographical distances between themselves.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, as well noted in relevant literature, ICT technologies and relevant devices and applications – mobile, machine learning, cloud computing, SNS, AI, and so on – have rapidly matured and continually developed in their functions on a yearly basis. Together, these factors suggest that the JTW program may experiment with something that has never been done before: rather than programming and closely monitoring the tutoring and conversation partner programs as JTW-arranged activities that involve both JTW and non-JTW students, the program may first encourage and support only when desirable both parties’ initiatives to start, continue and change their interactions, communications, and

other activities for cross-cultural exchange experience. This way, future participants of the JTW program as well as domestic students – Japanese students in particular – may benefit significantly by taking the lead, creatively and innovatively, for learning from and supporting one another beyond geographical distances.

### **6.3. For immersion experience activities – Learn from industry on ‘virtual’ cultural immersion**

This area of lessons for the future pertains to another set of key components of the JTW program as a comprehensive study program for international students: field study trips and the home visit program. The former refers to a series of trips, excursions and activities aiming to help program participants learn about the local history, economy, culture, and community life through their own first-hand experience, including experiencing rice planting with local farmers and seated meditation under the direct instruction of monks at a renowned Zen Temple. Over the course of a program year, about 14 field study trips are arranged and carried out. Meanwhile, the home visit program offers opportunities for program participants and local families to be paired through the program’s arrangement, to meet one another roughly on a weekly basis, and to conduct activities of their choice together. Participation in both the field study trip and home visit program components are optional; in every cycle of JTW, nonetheless, most program participants partake in both opportunities to pursue cross-cultural learning experiences off campus. Since the declaration of the state of emergency in April 2020, most fields study trips have been cancelled altogether due mainly to the unavailability of the host sites of the scheduled destinations. Also, as discussed earlier, almost all host families of the home visit program halted their close communication and interaction with the program participants due to the call for social distancing.

There is an immense amount of literature arguing that cultural immersion experience plays a key role to facilitate understanding of culture that is not one’s own in an effective and time-efficient manner.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, these activities have long been an integral part the JTW program. What could then be done to continue offering such unique opportunities, conducted entirely off campus and in non-academic settings, in a “post-pandemic age,” which will likely stand as a major hindrance to these activities that seem to essentially require participants’ physical presence onsite? It is particularly challenging to find a way to continue offering such opportunities in an era in which students’ daily life may be interrupted by a strict call for social distancing at any point in time during their study period.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, one direction worth pursuing is for the JTW program as part of an academic institution to actively learn from or even collaborate with the industrial world, both domestic and overseas. Over the past decade, an increasing number of business corporations in North America and parts of Europe in particular have started arranging and offering what is often referred to as “virtual internships,” which aim to provide interns with opportunities to experience some selected aspects of work of their interest fully or partially remotely. This alternative arrangement is typically enabled by state-of-the-art ICT technologies that help create a sense of immersion among the interns into a real-world workplace.<sup>10</sup> This alternative, increasingly popular method has to date been arranged almost exclusively for internships in white-collar jobs, and this has been carried out at the expense of losing the sense of authenticity to some extent.<sup>11</sup> With learning and working closely with

industries actively practicing “virtual internships,” however, the JTW program might find a source of knowledge as to how to apply this business practice to its future arrangement for the program participants’ immersion experience.

## 7. Conclusion: Summary and implications for KIKAN education

This article first overviewed the role and design of Japan In Today’s World as Kyushu University’s representative study program for exchange students from its leading partner institutions around the world. It then described the ways in which the ongoing global public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, affected the operation of the 26<sup>th</sup> cycle of the program and the learning experiences of its participants, both academic and experiential. As its main goal, this article discussed key lessons for the future operation of JTW in order to help sustain, or even possibly enhance the effectiveness of JTW as a study program in a “post-pandemic age,” to come.

In summary, JTW should certainly be able to adjust to the new age first by making efforts to improve and continue to strengthen the ICT proficiency of those who directly provide academic instruction to the participants: the JTW core course instructors. As this article argues, nonetheless, JTW would also benefit from adopting some new approaches that the program has never proactively pursued. For instance, active promotion of students’ own initiatives and strategic utilization of their high-level ICT proficiency should be consciously employed. The program should also explore the possible value, or even necessity, of beginning to engaged in an academia--industry nexus for the sake of continuously offering effective international education; collaboration with certain business corporations should be considered as a potential resource for experiential learning through the establishment of “virtual internship” programs. This may allow JTW to continue offering opportunities for cultural immersion experiences as a feature component of the program, even if students must participate remotely.

These possible lessons could also be a meaningful reference for the University’s KIKAN education today and in the future. The effective use of PBL and TBL in JTW core courses may be a unique and valuable model for some of the other KIKAN general elective courses to emulate, especially for those courses aiming to encourage co-learning between domestic and international students. Furthermore, as part of its core educational mission, KIKAN education has long been engaged in actively promoting cross-cultural, global education. Arguably, what JTW may experiment with in the future renovation of its activities for student-to-student cross cultural exchange and immersion experience as discussed above could be referenced as a valuable precursory case to emulate or as a unique activity model with which to collaborate. Such contributions would further strengthen KIKAN education’s role in nurturing students’ human development through quality general education.

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