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# International Learning amid the Global Pandemic: The Case of the College of Asia Pacific (CAP) Program

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Today, higher education institutions around the world are caught in a dilemma. While pressured to continue minimizing students' international mobility, many institutions remain expected to increase their efforts in providing students with opportunities to experience impactful international learning. This article contributes to the rapidly growing body of literature on the impact of the unprecedented global pandemic on higher education by focusing on students' experience of international learning in these challenging times. The specific case to be focused on is the *College of Asia Pacific* (CAP) Program, one of the short-term study programs that Kyushu University International Student Center coordinates, which was carried out online in FY2020 and FY2021. This article presents evidence suggesting that in each year most of the participants, both Japanese and international, reported a high level of satisfaction with the program. This article contends, however, that a conventional, onsite program may be more effective to help students to develop cross-cultural competencies including proficiency in academic English, as it requires participants to step out of their comfort zone. While some students may feel more comfortable with an online format because they feel less intimidated and more comfortable, going through such challenges is necessary for students to benefit from the impactful experiences of international learning.

## 1. Introduction: International Education under COVID-19

Teaching and learning have gone online, but how has this approach worked for international learning experiences and what changes might be necessary for the future practice of international education? The global outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19, hereafter) has rapidly expanded the practice of online teaching and learning at most higher education institutions across the world.<sup>1</sup> As a result, most campus community members, including faculty members and administrative staff as well as students, have been forced to continue their work and study remotely, away from conventional face-to-face settings. Cross-border travel between cities or states within a country – not to mention international travel – are strongly discouraged, if not strictly prohibited, amid the persistent prevalence of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Under these circumstances most universities around the world today find themselves caught in a dilemma that is unprecedented in their history: while facing ever-intensifying needs to implement health and safety measures to protect their campus community members, many of them are expected to continue growing as hubs for nurturing the next generation of citizens to be equipped with global awareness and cross-cultural competencies, providing students with resources and opportunities for impactful learning experiences.<sup>3</sup> As a result, many universities have designed and carried out what is often referred to as 'virtual study abroad' curricula or programs as a way to both adopt the societal pressure to keep their activities online and to continue

delivering international education, simultaneously.<sup>4</sup>

This article aims to contribute to the body of literature on the impact of COVID-19 on today's international education at a higher education level. While the literature of this focus has been rapidly growing just over the past year and will likely continue developing in the coming decade, much of the focus has to date been limited to the experience of universities in North America and Europe.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, those in Asia, including the case of Japan, remain notably understudied despite Asia's growing importance as a provider of outbound students as well as a host region of international education in this century.<sup>6</sup>

To help close this gap in the literature, this article presents a case study of a short-term study program carried out annually by the International Student Center of Kyushu University, one of the large, public, higher education institutions in Japan. The program of focus is the College of Asia Pacific, a two-week, English-taught, interdisciplinary study program conducted annually for both domestic and international students. At the University, the CAP program is officially registered and administered as a study abroad program designed to provide the participants with international learning opportunities overseas. This case study first analyzes how COVID-19 has affected the operation of this specific international study program and the experience of the participants. It then presents lessons and suggestions for the future operation of the program in the coming 'post-pandemic' age in order to continue serving as a package of resources and opportunities for students' international learning. The overarching goal is not only to disseminate the findings as a case of the experience in Japan into the growing body of academic literature on international education during the COVID-19 pandemic; it also aims more generally to share lessons and suggestions with the international community of professionals involved in operating short-term study programs similar to this one.

## 2. The College of Asia Pacific Program: An Overview

The College of Asia Pacific program (CAP, hereafter) is a short-term study abroad program jointly arranged and implemented with the University of Hawai'i (UH, hereafter) as a partner institution. The participants include both Japanese and international students: those enrolled full-time in Kyushu University (mostly Japanese) and international students from other universities in the Asia-Pacific region, respectively. While targeting primarily undergraduate students at an entry-level, students of any grade or major are eligible to apply. As a short-term and intensive program, CAP lasts for two weeks, typically in mid-August, during the summer vacation period of most universities in Japan. Similar to other short-term study programs Kyushu University arranges, CAP was originally designed as an onsite program. However, it has been shifted to an online program since FY2020 because of the surge in the global health crisis. The program is also registered as part of the University's KIKAN Education curriculum: upon successfully completing the program, Kyushu University students are eligible to earn two credits. International participants may also transfer the credits to their home institutions upon their own request and formal approval from the institutions.

The CAP program is comprised of three main components: formal lectures delivered by UH-affiliated faculty members; student-led discussion forums based on the lecture topics; and group research projects toward

final presentations. All the formal lectures focus on examining diverse issues and historical backgrounds in the Asia-Pacific region from a social scientific perspective. Main topics include, but are not limited to, “Historical Changes in the Japanese American Community in Hawaii,” “Representations of Asians in Hollywood Movies,” “Social Movements among Natives and Immigrants in Hawaiian Society,” “Japanese American Internment Camps in World War II and their Legacy,” among others.

The educational goals of the CAP program are three-fold: First, it aims to help students to gain intensive first-hand experience with engaging in problem-based learning (PBL) and team-based learning (TBL). The students are expected to declare an interest in the common issues of today’s Asia-Pacific region and to develop a better understanding of the background, causes, and current status of these issues through these learning approaches. Second, the program facilitates the students’ direct experience of co-learning with other participants from different socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds in a diverse learning environment. This way, the students may develop a foundation for their cross-cultural competencies and leadership qualities in an internationally collaborative setting. Finally, but not of less importance, the program provides the students with short-term, intensive overseas experience as a significant step toward their long-term study abroad in the conceivable future, including studying at the University’s partner institutions as exchange students for a semester or longer.

### 3. Methods and Data

The discussion of this article is based on empirical data obtained from the CAP program conducted in FY2020 and FY2021, both of which were carried out online. The data are drawn from two sources: post-program survey responses from the participants and participant observations conducted by the program’s faculty coordinator, one of the authors of this article. While only Japanese students participated in FY2020, both Japanese and international students partook in FY2021. Table 1, below, presents the breakdown of the number of participants for each year. In FY2020, 24 Japanese students participated; in FY2021 (Table 1), a total of 33 students participated including 26 Japanese students, six from University A (in an East Asian country), and one from University B (in a Southeast Asia country).

Table 1 Number of CAP FY2020 participants by faculty and grade (only Japanese students)

Faculty	Number of students	Grade			
		1 <sup>st</sup> year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	4 <sup>th</sup> year
Agriculture	2	1			1
Economics	2	1	1		
Education	1	1			
Engineering	1				1
Law	3	2			1
Literatures	2				2
Medicine	2	1		1	

Pharmaceutical Science	1		1		
Science	2	1	1		
SISI*	8	3	5		
Total	24	10	8	1	5

\*The School of Interdisciplinary Science and Innovation

Source: Authors

It is worth noting that in FY2020, it had been exactly one year since the COVID-19 pandemic caused various restrictions in most activities at Kyushu University, and many students who had planned to study abroad were forced to give up on their plans. In addition, there were students who had already completed other short-term study abroad programs including one-year exchange programs but decided to participate in the CAP program because of their interest in engaging in international learning activities again just before graduation. This helps explain that while the CAP program is designed primarily for entry-level students, the breakdown in Table 1 indicates that 25 percent of the Japanese students were in the third or fourth year of their undergraduate studies. In FY2021, as Table 2 shows, the program decided to experimentally open its application to universities outside Japan and then accepted participants from two universities. The Japanese students joined from a variety of faculties ranging from the areas of humanities and social sciences to medicine and engineering. Both for FY2020 and FY2021, the largest number of students were from the School of Interdisciplinary Sciences and Innovation, a new school at Kyushu University officially designed as an interdisciplinary faculty (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 2 Number of CAP FY2021 participants by faculty and grade (Japanese and international students)

Institution (Japanese/Int'l)	Faculty	Number of students	Grade			
			1 <sup>st</sup> year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	4 <sup>th</sup> year
Kyushu University	Agriculture	2	1		1	
	Economics	2	2			
	Engineering	1	1			
	Design	1	1			
	Law	2		2		
	Literatures	1	1			
	Medicine	1	1			
	Science	1			1	
	SISI*	14	2	7	4	1
	GSHEs**	1	1			
	Total	26	10	9	6	1
University A	N/A	6	2	1	1	2
University B	N/A	1			1	
	Total	7	2	1	2	2
Total		33	12	10	8	3

\*The School of Interdisciplinary Science and Innovation

\*\*The Graduate School of Human-Environment Studies (the participant is a first-year master's student)

Source: Authors

The post-program surveys were developed in close collaboration with some of the UH-affiliated faculty members involved in the operation of the CAP program. The questionnaire included students' assessment of the formal lectures and the program as a whole. The response rates reached a statistically significant level: about 88 percent and 64 percent for FY-2020 and FY2021, respectively.

## 4. Findings from Post-Programs Surveys

The post-program surveys – both for FY2020 and FY2021 – asked the students to rate their experiences with three key aspects of the CAP program: their experience of (1) the program as a whole; (2) skill development for cross-cultural communication; and (2) non-lecture learning activities. For the FY2020 survey, 21 out of 24 program participants (only Japanese) responded to the survey, and 20 out of 33 (both Japanese and international) for FY2021 – response rates of 88 percent and 61 percent, respectively. As will be detailed below, generally, the students reported highly positive views toward all the three aspects of the program despite its being carried out online both years.

### 4.1. Overall program experience

For each year, the Japanese participants in the online program seemed highly satisfied with the overall quality of their experience. Figure 1, below, illustrates the distributions of the responses to the statement, “I am very happy that I participated in this program,” which was used for both years. The respondents were asked to choose their answer out of five options on a Likert scale: “strongly agree;” “agree;” “neither;” “disagree;” and “strongly disagree.” As indicated in Figure 1, 18 out of 21 respondents in FY2020 reported that they “strongly agree” with this statement, and 17 out of 20 in FY2021 did the same. For both years, above 85 percent of the respondents selected this answer option, indicating that the majority of them were very content with their participation in the CAP program.

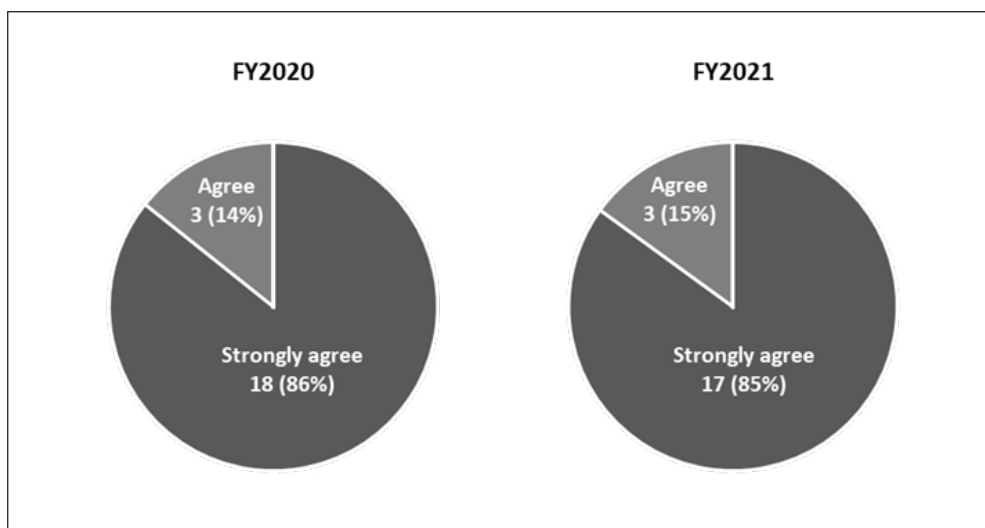


Figure 1 Post-program survey responses: “I am happy that I participated in this program.”

#### 4.2. Skill development for cross-cultural communication

Most respondents also seemed content with the effectiveness of their program participation in helping to develop their cross-cultural communication skills, namely, proficiency in academic English in the internationally co-learning settings that the program offered. This skill development, as mentioned earlier, is one of the educational goals of the program. In response to the statement “this program helped to improve my English skills,” 19 out of 21 respondents in FY2020 selected the “strongly agree” option, and 17 out of 20 in FY2021 did the same. Similar to the case of the overall program experience, the majority of respondents reported a highly positive view, indicating that they highly valued the role of the program in this important aspect of their international learning experience.



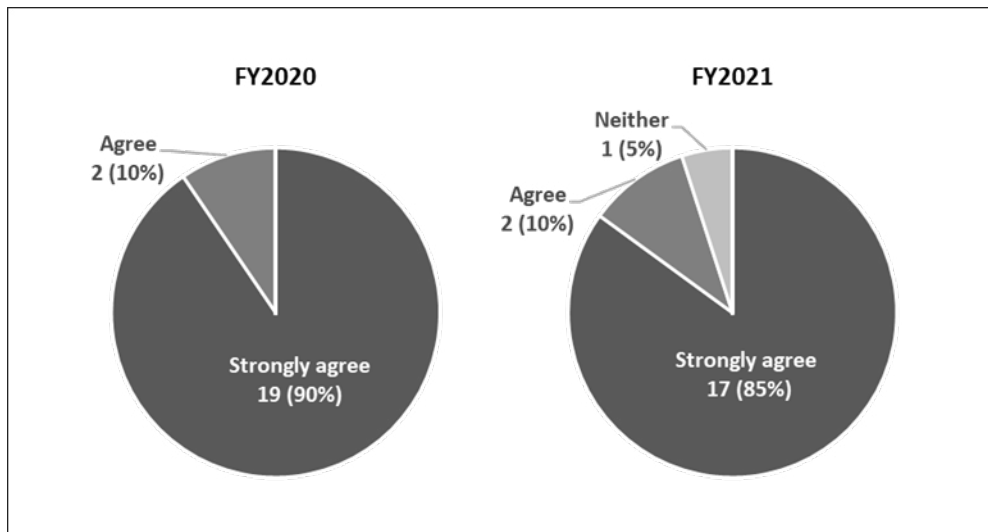


Figure 2 Post-program survey responses: “This program helped to improve my English skills.”

#### 4.3. Experience with non-lecture learning activities

The CAP program arranges and carries out two sets of learning activities designed to supplement the formal lectures and to help enhance participants’ learning experience: the discussion forum and group research projects. Only for FY2020, the program also conducted a virtual cultural excursion activity named “Hawaiian Mission House Virtual Tour.” Together, these activities were incorporated into the program as its non-lecture learning activities. The post-program surveys in FY2020 and FY2021 commonly included a question asking about the respondents’ view of how useful these non-lecture elements were in enhancing their cross-cultural learning experience.

Figure 3, below, illustrates the distributions of the responses in FY2020 and FY2021, respectively. For this question, respondents were asked to rate the perceived usefulness of each of the three activities (the question of the virtual tour was included only in FY2020 survey) based on Likert-scale options consisting of “very useful,” “useful,” “neither,” “not useful,” and “not useful at all.” As for the responses for FY2020, 17 (over 80 percent) of the 21 respondents and 14 (about 67 percent) of the same chose the “very useful” option regarding the discussion forum and group research project, respectively. 15 (above 71 percent) of the respondents reported that they found the virtual tour “very useful” or “useful” (5 respondents for the former, and 10 for the latter). In the FY2021 responses, 15 (about 71 percent) out of 20 respondents reported that they thought the discussion forum ‘very useful,’ and 14 (about 67 percent) of them found the group research project the same way.

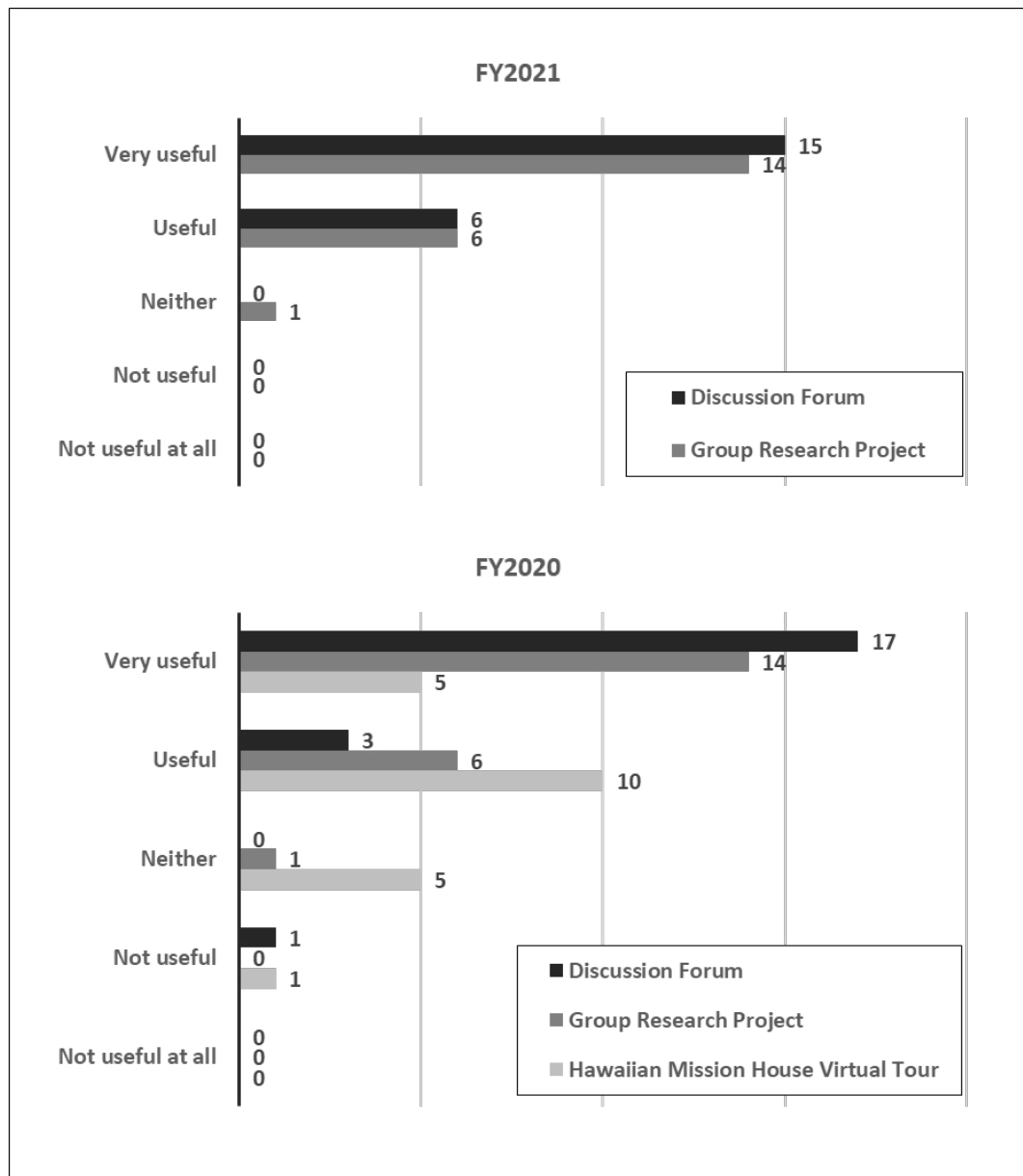


Figure 3 Post-program survey responses related to the usefulness of non-lecture learning activities

Both the discussion forum and group research project were effective, albeit online, in facilitating program participants' cross-cultural learning activities. This observation was confirmed by the following comment that one of the program participants wrote as part of their response to the FY2020 survey:

*From the beginning of class, I was so worried because there are a lot of readings so I was not sure I can participate well or not. But I tried to be well-prepared as much as possible and better preparation helped me gain my confidence. Through taking part in discussion forums and presentation research, I had opportunities to voice my opinions and learn how to speak in front of class confidently. In addition,*

*it was also a chance for me to listen to other students' ideas from different perspectives, which broadened my horizon a lot. And working as a team for Presentation Research, we learned how to collaborate effectively and smoothly and improve our academic skills as well...*

## 5. Findings from Participant Observations

One of the authors of this article served as the faculty coordinator for the CAP program both for FY2020 and FY2021. While in charge of arranging and leading all the activities in close collaboration with the UH counterpart, the faculty coordinator was in the position to be able to observe and closely communicate with all the participants both individually and as a group at any point in time during the program. Taking advantage of this position, participant observation was conducted throughout the period, and three key findings are discussed below.

First, the participation of international students in the CAP program, as was the case in FY2021, significantly contributed to enhancing the quality of group work activities including the final presentations. This was noticeable particularly when compared to the FY2020 program in which only Japanese students participated. In the FY2021 program, the formal lecture on the Japanese American community in Hawai'i covered some issues related to the Korean American community, which seemed a valuable opportunity for the students from Korea University to learn about the history of their ethnic group in a Hawaiian context. It was observed that international students, particularly those from Korea University, actively engaged in the in-class discussion on both the similarities and differences between the Japanese American and the Korean counterpart, and their activeness stimulated the Japanese students.

Second, the online implementation of the program seemed to allow the students to have discussions and conversations with few psychological barriers. Since they were interacting remotely only through a computer screen, the fine nuances of facial expressions were blurred and the eye contact was not expected, which paradoxically seemed to have a positive effect particularly on some Japanese students. According to a Japanese student who participated in the FY2021 program, she tended to feel nervous in face-to-face discussions with non-Japanese people because she was unsure about the correct way to make eye contact or facial expressions. She confessed, however, that once the program started, she instantly found it surprisingly unthreatening to verbalize her thoughts and opinions through her PC camera. Another student stated that the online lecture enabled him to look up unfamiliar words on the Internet while listening, which during the discussion forum significantly reduced the number of times he had trouble fully expressing his thoughts or ideas because of his lack of vocabulary.

Finally, it is also worth paying attention to the internal diversity among the participants from Korea University who participated only in FY2021. Two of the six students from this university were already international students in this student group even before participating in the CAP program; they were originally from Ukraine and Vietnam and studying at the university in Korea. This means, while studying at Korea University as international students, they also participated in a short-term international study program hosted

by a third foreign university: Kyushu University. This unique status may be referred to as a “double/dual study abroad” experience, which would have been difficult to practice if the program were conducted in a conventional, onsite setting due to the costs associated with the physical travel and various legal and administrative burdens related to immigration procedures. Personal conversations with these two international students also confirmed that it was precisely the online implementation that motivated them to apply for this program.

## 6. Discussions: Disadvantages Behind High Satisfaction?

Drawing on empirical data, this article has discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the operation of the CAP program and the experiences of the students. Both in FY2020 and FY2021, the global health crisis has forced this study abroad program to be conducted online, rather than in the conventional, face-to-face manner. Despite concerns regarding the effectiveness and comfortability of online learning, the majority of the participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with their learning experience in the program, as suggested by the findings from the post-program surveys and participant observations.

Is this analysis sufficient to conclude that the online implementation of the CAP program was successful in achieving its educational goals? If so, could one go on to suggest that the pandemic has posited few challenges to the effectiveness of international education, including the operation of a short-term study abroad program such as CAP, thanks to the utility of advanced technologies surrounding learning in today’s landscape of higher education? This article calls for critical thinking to cautiously discern potential disadvantages to the online implementation of study abroad programs such as CAP that loom behind the high satisfaction expressed by and observed among the students on the surface.

It is important to note that the online implementation not only forces but also allows students, both Japanese and international, to participate in all the learning activities of the program without leaving the places with which they feel familiar, such as their homes or the classrooms on their own campuses. Arguably, the persistent pandemic allowed the students to keep them in their “comfort zones,”<sup>7</sup> while experiencing study abroad in a virtual fashion. This aspect of their learning experience may have helped some students to enjoy positive learning outcomes, by removing some of the psychological barriers to actively engaging in the cross-cultural and co-learning settings. This might have been the case particularly for some Japanese students who conveyed to the faculty coordinator that they usually feel intimidated and thus hold themselves back when learning in a face-to-face cross-cultural setting. One may thus argue that this could be one of the unique merits of the online implementation of the CAP program. That is, the sense of ease and comfort due to the remoteness – via online learning – may be a factor behind the seemingly high satisfaction the students expressed with the program.

However, this article argues, at least tentatively, that online implementation of study abroad programs, such as CAP, should be considered primarily as a supplement and complementary to conventional, onsite operations. This is because the CAP program is originally intended to provide students with opportunities to

directly immerse themselves in the local culture and social institutions of Japan firsthand. During the onsite program, the students will be “forced” to step out of their comfort zones and experience new domains that they have never done before. Lacking this “force” element, the online implementation of CAP may not serve students as a true alternative to study abroad involving physical travel<sup>8</sup>.

Study abroad refers, therefore, to a set of experiences of living and studying in a culture where everything one sees, hears, smells, eats, and touches is different from those familiar at home.<sup>9</sup> Through interactions and dialogue with people who speak different languages, one may also experience and understand being “other in the eyes of the local people, thereby developing foundations for cross-cultural competencies.”<sup>10</sup> Online study programs for international education have their own merits and virtues, as uncovered in the case of the CAP program in FY2020 and FY2021. However, because of the fundamental incapacity to deliver the essence of an actual study abroad experience, online programs should be considered a new form of, or approach to, international education that is distinct from study abroad programs that involve physical travel.

## 7. Conclusion: The Future of Study Abroad

This article has focused on the impact of the persistent pandemic of COVID-19 on the College of Asia Pacific (CAP) program, one of the short-term study abroad programs run by the International Student Center at Kyushu University, a university in Japan. The pandemic pushed the program to an online implementation for the past two years, FY2020 and FY2021. This article then presented evidence suggesting that in each year the students who participated in the program, both Japanese and international, tended to view their learning experience in a positive light, valuing the program as a package of resources and opportunities to study in a cross-cultural and co-learning setting. Shifting a study abroad program to an online format is, however, not the answer today nor in the coming years in ‘post-pandemic’ social landscapes. A conventional, onsite program is more effective to help students to develop cross-cultural competencies including proficiency in academic English as it requires participants to step out of their comfort zone. While some students may feel more comfortable with an online format because they feel less challenged, from an educational perspective, going through such challenges is necessary for students to benefit from the impactful experiences of international learning.

It is challenging for those involved in arranging and carrying out online programs, to schedule activities, collaborate with a partner institution, and teach and support students all through a computer screen. The faculty coordinator of the CAP program regularly encountered unexpected challenges and issues to pursue the educational goals of the CAP program and keep intact a variety of activities as part of program. By contrast, to the students, online study abroad programs may have been more casual, less intimidating, and thus more approachable than in the case of study abroad programs conducted onsite. As discussed earlier, this casualness and approachability might have been enjoyed, however, at the expense of keeping the students from attaining learning outcomes that they could have gained only through participating onsite.

Kyushu University as a whole has at least temporarily resumed face-to-face lectures in the 2021 academic year, at the time of this writing. Students, from freshmen to seniors, are exhausted with online lectures, and

managing their attitude and motivation has been recognized as an urgent issue. Significant restrictions are still being imposed, however. What the future holds for the global spread of this infectious disease, which has plunged the world into an unprecedented situation, still remains largely unpredictable. It is worth noting, however, that the inevitable transition of higher education to functioning online as a result of the epidemic has opened up new possibilities for international education at a higher education level. Through this experience, we were able to discover the possibility of holding the study abroad program online. In a sense, it was an ideal environment to practice holding the program onsite, and we encourage the students to challenge to study abroad in a conventional sense in the future. On the verge of an uncertain “post-pandemic” era, this article contends that higher education institutions should continue to acknowledge and protect the value and significance of conventional, onsite programs as a powerful and irreplaceable approach to students’ learning experience.

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