

Student perspectives and narratives on short- and long-term study abroad programs at Rikkyo University

By Saki Imai, Matsuki Ebana & Zane Ritchie

Introduction

The following paper consists of narratives of two students of the College of Community and Human Services regarding their experiences studying abroad. First, Saki Imai, a third-year student in the Department of Community Development, outlines her views regarding her participation in a short-term program to Dublin, Ireland in 2016. This is followed by a report by Matsuki Ebana, a fourth-year student, also in the Department of Community Development, who took part on a one-year exchange program at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand in 2015. Through reading these two narratives, it is hoped that the two students' peers will be motivated to challenge themselves and apply to various study abroad programs, either short-term or long-term, depending on their needs, especially as the College of Community and Human Services is seeking to expand its study abroad program options.

It is also the authors' desire that the narratives will encourage the reader to broaden their own perspectives of the world, especially in this time of increased interest from overseas in Japan, as demonstrated by the massive increase in international visitors, and of course the upcoming Tokyo Olympics. So please enjoy these narratives that have been compiled in simple English to introduce the reader to some of what we believe can be life-changing possibilities and opportunities that can arise from studying abroad.

ONE. A short trip to the Emerald Isle, by Saki Imai, third-year, Department of Community Development

I went to Ireland in February to study abroad. It was actually my first time to go to abroad and I will introduce my experiences here. I had decided to study abroad when I

was a high school student because I interested in English. Also, I think that to know other countries and to communicate with foreigners will be important in the near future, especially for the Tokyo Olympic in 2020. I wanted to improve my speaking skills, make many friends from different places and to learn about different cultures. It was big challenge for me, and I realized this experience would make me grow as a person, which is why I applied for the the short-term study abroad program. So, I left Japan on February 21 and started my new life in Dublin, the capital of Ireland, for a month. While there, life was so exciting and I learned many things which I could never have experienced in Japan. Some of these I have outlined below for you.

Learning in different ways

I attended Dublin City University (DCU) which is a language school. During the day, we had normal language classes. But the teaching structure was different to that of Japan. For example, we had to keep talking during class which meant that I had so many chances to express myself in English. And, the teacher would encourage me by saying, "Don't worry about grammar and pronunciation. You only have to communicate with the other students and enjoy chatting!" It inspired me and taught me that communication is easier than I think. This class gave me confidence.

Sometimes I took Irish culture as an optional class and I learned Gaelic (Irish language), hurling (the national sport), Irish music, and all about the potato famine. The potato is a staple food in Ireland, and I was surprised to learn this, so I wrote a report about the Irish Potato Famine as a project for class. Not only did I study in class, I had plenty of homework too, and I learned much new vocabulary and idioms and also discovered new words when I watched TV, read magazines or listened to the radio. From this, I tried using the new vocabulary in the next day's class. I was often reminded to express new words in simple English, and found it was good practice for learning expressions. I certainly remembered a lot of new vocabulary this way. Other optional classes introduced various topics like film, discussion and jobs. I also joined the communication class and the teacher made groups which consisted of different students from different countries.

The value of other cultures

There were many students in my class whose native languages were not English, such as French, Chinese, Turks, Spaniards and Brazilians. At first, I was overwhelmed by other countries' students because they took part in class very actively. They ask the

teacher right away when they are not sure, they don't hesitate to ask questions when they don't understand, and they always make an effort to get into high class levels as they are not satisfied with the present condition. Therefore, their level of speaking English was very high. I was surprised about that because Japanese students are not like them at all, and I came to understand how low the level of English education was in Japan, especially regarding spoken English. I really thought I should learn from their attitudes and it really inspired me, as it was interesting to talk with them. Each country has a different culture, so their ideas, values and behaviors were very different to mine. For example, some of them were often late for school; the French were very talkative and fast talkers; and the Turks were easy-going and did things in their own way, and didn't care about others.

Irish warmth and hospitality

I really enjoyed the warm, Irish hospitality. I was a homestay, and my host family members consisted of my mother, father, two daughters, one son and two dogs. My host mother cooked me delicious dishes and taught me how to cook Irish food, and we watched TV and enjoyed chatting each day after dinner. Also, my host parents taught me news of Ireland such as the government, environment and history. In exchange, as I also wanted them to get to know about Japan, so I cooked them Okonomiyaki and taught them how to make Origami. Because of these activities and cultural exchange with my host family, I was able to develop a very good relationship with them.

There were no classes in the afternoon so I often went to the city center, which is urban but very different from Tokyo, with its tall buildings. There are houses which have colorful doors, musicians who play musical instruments on the street and many pubs which have good atmospheres. I enjoyed shopping, eating, drinking and sightseeing. The pub was the nicest place of all, because we could eat delicious dishes and drink Guinness beer with nice music.

Finally, there was St. Patrick's Day. This is the anniversary of St. Patrick who spread Christianity to Ireland. I studied the history of St. Patrick in class and learned a lot about the Saint that I did not know. The day is a public holiday all over the country and they hold big parades in celebration. In fact it is one of the biggest events in the country, so I felt so lucky to have participated. Green and shamrock are both symbols of St. Patrick so people put on something green or wear shamrocks during the celebrations. I enjoyed the parade with my classmate who is French and although

there were many people and it was crowded, it was an amazing experience. The people of Ireland were certainly so warm and friendly to us!

TWO. A year in Aotearoa, by Matsuki Ebana, fourth-year, Department of Community development

Since the College of Community and Human Services offers great programs in English, they stimulated me to become interested in the language. When I was in my second year, I participated in an international forum, called “YKRF Leadership Forum”. It included discussion, lectures and cultural experiences with Chinese and Korean students, and everything was carried out in English. This experience gave me the motivation to learn English more because the Korean and Chinese students could speak fluently. I really thought I needed to study English more to become an international person. Also, talking with people from various backgrounds was interesting for me and it gave me new values and thoughts. For those reasons, I decided to study abroad for a year as an exchange student.

Why New Zealand?

Since Rikkyo University has a lot of partner schools, I was able to choose from various places, and I decided to go to Victoria University of Wellington, which has a reputation as one of the best universities in New Zealand. I selected Victoria University from the point of view of my major, its education system and with a view to my future job seeking. I major in Community Development at Rikkyo University, and Victoria University also provides great development courses. Therefore, Victoria University was a good environment for me to study in. The education system is also one of the reasons why I chose New Zealand. New Zealand’s universities have tutorial systems (small group seminars), and include presentations, group work, field study and so on, and I feel that taking these is highly practical compared to just attending lectures. Finally, the period of study abroad was important for me because I needed to come back to Japan by spring to look for a job. Usually the United States and Europe countries start their semesters from autumn, and the end of school year is almost summer; however, Australian and New Zealand universities start from spring, and finish in winter, which is almost the same as Japanese universities which would give me time to look for a job in Japan. These are the three reasons that pushed me to go to New Zealand.

Deeper learning, broadening perspectives

I majored in human geography and development studies during my time at Victoria University. human geography is the study about relations between humans and environment. For example, human geographers seek answers to questions such as, “Why culture is different in places?” and “What is globalisation?” On the other hand, development studies is the study about relations between developed and developing countries. Hence, researchers think about questions such as : “Why are there there rich countries and poor countries?” These subjects are similar to my major in Rikkyo University, so I was able to deepen my knowledge. At the same time, it gave me a new perspective, since community development, which is my major in Japan, mainly focuses on small local communities like municipalities and NPOs, whereas human geography studies relations between local and global communities. Therefore, I learned the importance of connections between local and global matters. Study in New Zealand gave me not only English skills, but also a new perspective of my study major at Rikkyo.

Outside of the classroom

I participated in a variety of extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. Victoria University has various club activities, and I joined the hiking (tramping, in New Zealand English) club. I was also a member of a discussion club. Student take part in these clubs to take their mind off studies. However, club activities also can also provide opportunities to learn new things and values. For examples, in the discussion club, I debated international affairs and cultural differences with other international students. This was good opportunity to become familiar with some differences in the thought and values between Japanese and New Zealanders.

There were also a lot of local activities in Wellington, and I participated as a member of the local taiko (Japanese drums) team, for example. Citizens of Wellington run the team, which is called “Narukami Taiko”, and I was actually the sole Japanese on the team. We practiced once a week, and performed at local festivals once every two months. Since I could communicate with local people, participating in such a local community was a good experience.

The most impressive thing for me was a chance to conduct private research in Christchurch. I went to Christchurch with Professor Zane Ritchie, my former teacher in the College of Community and Human Services, on a disaster study tour in summer.

Christchurch had big earthquake in 2011, and the city is still under construction. Mr. Ritchie and I visited the University of Canterbury and conducted research through interviews with a professor and student. There are some similarities, but also differences with the disaster in Japan. This research also gave me further motivation to study Human Geography and Community Development. These activities were impressive and important experiences for me. I would like to recommend younger students take part in extracurricular programs, if they study abroad.

Concluding remarks

The experiences of the two students on the short- and long-term overseas study abroad programs not only provided them with precious and valuable memories, but also changed their lives. Through studying in new and exciting environments, creating life-long friendships, and taking part in a number of programs and extracurricular activities in immersive environments, the students were able to enhance their perspectives on the world not just outside, but also inside, Japan. Below are some final comments from them.

Mr. Ebana:

Overall, my study abroad was a really good experience. I had to take a year off from Rikkyo to go on exchange; however, my study abroad was more meaningful than time, and I am sure that this experience will be invaluable to me for the rest of my life. In terms of study and intercultural communication, I could have an amazing experience. If you or anybody you know is wondering whether to study abroad or not, I would say, "You should go". It will be a great experience!

And, Ms. Imai:

Through these experiences I learned a lot of important things. I learned English of course, but more than that, I also learned the "spirit of challenge", which was a big incentive for me. After coming back to Japan, I began challenging new things, such as belly dancing or setting goals to get a better TOEIC score, or participating as a volunteer for overseas students. The experience gave me motivation and I think studying abroad is important more and more for students because Tokyo will host the Olympics in 2020 and we have to understand foreign countries and introduce Japan to the world, and to do so means communicating with them is essential. University students have time, so it is a

good time to experience studying abroad. It was just a short-term program but I spent fulfilling days because I set goals and prepared well beforehand, and I think the experience made me grow as a person.