



## **Study Abroad Perspectives: An Interview with Akiko Mohri** **by Tim Newfields**

*Akiko Mohri has been editor-in-chief of the Ryugaku Journal since 2009. Prior to that, she was a magazine editor for the Asahi Shimbun (now Asahi Shimbun Publishing). With a background in editing publications for hotels and restaurants, she then served as a PR consultant, joining the Ryugaku Journal in 2002. This interview was conducted in Japanese via email in May and June 2016. It was translated by the interviewer, and that translation was checked by four bilingual individuals.*

### **Could you briefly explain something about the historical background of the "Ryugaku Journal"?**

The magazine was launched in 1983. The parent company, known as the ICS International Exchange Center (KK), was launched in 1971. Its initial focus was on study abroad consultation. We created the magazine to provide information and advice about study abroad to those interested in overseas studies. It was hard going at first, and employees had to consult with bookstores directly to persuade them to carry our publication. The first edition had a small-size binding at a time when one American dollar was worth more than three hundred yen. In that issue, we introduced 168 American and British universities and graduate schools. We feel proud of our achievements promoting foreign language study abroad programs throughout Japan.

### **How has your target audience changed since the publication was first launched?**

In fact, our main target audience has not changed much: the bulk of our readers are in the 18-to-24 age range. They are either university students, or adults who have quit their jobs to sharpen their long-term employment prospects through overseas study. It is no exaggeration to say that the best time for study abroad is when at university, as it is relatively easy to take extended chunks of time off. However, more and more mid-career professionals are deciding to quit their jobs after a few years to hone their career skills.

As I will soon explain, in recent years we have also witnessed a broader age range among study abroad participants. Nowadays both high school students and senior citizens are becoming more interested in overseas study, and we are attempting to fulfill their aspirations.

### **What are some of the common misconceptions that journal readers have about study abroad?**

Many people seem to have rather narrowly fixed notions about study abroad. For example, I am often asked, "What is the most popular study abroad destination?" However, answers vary widely depending upon participant goals. We need to overcome rigidly stereotypical images of what constitutes study abroad. There are many different ways of studying abroad, and patterns continually change. This is something I want more study abroad applicants to know.

Some people do not even know that one- or two-week study abroad programs even exist. Knowing about such short-term study options widens participant options.



***In some countries, a distinction is often made between “study abroad,” “overseas internships,” and “volunteering abroad.” How about in Japan? Is this distinction significant in Japanese contexts? Does the Ryugaku Journal try to provide information about all sorts of overseas activities?***

Volunteering overseas should be distinguished from overseas internships. Overseas internships are essentially working for free for a company to garner experience for future employment. High standards of linguistic proficiency are usually called for, and this represents a hurdle for most Japanese people. Volunteering overseas is also gratis, but humanitarian support is the main objective, and the standards for volunteer work vary widely. Such programs often have an experiential learning framework in which "hands on" participation is a primary goal. Each of these types of programs has varied objectives and outcomes. Moreover, in terms of job-hunting within Japan, they are rated somewhat differently.

Our magazine uses the word "ryūgaku" [study abroad] in a broad, generic sense that encompasses overseas studies at academic institutions, working holiday sojourns, foreign internships, as well as international volunteering. We focus on all aspects of what Japanese term "ryūgaku" and provide detailed information how various types of overseas programs differ, as well as detailed information about each type of program.

***In recent decades, what trends have you noticed among Japanese going overseas?***

One turning point in history was the 1985 Plaza Accord, in which the G5 finance ministers agreed to depreciate the Japanese yen and German mark against the U.S. dollar at the NY Plaza Hotel. From the next day onwards, the Japanese yen soared and for a time it became much easier for Japanese people to study abroad.

Until Japan's asset price bubble burst in 1991, study abroad boomed and many Japanese people ventured all over the world. The so-called "*OL ryūgaku*" phenomenon, in which female office workers took overseas study courses, became popular. Another trend was "*petit ryūgaku*," in which mid-career professionals took a week or two off to "acquire culture" by learning English or flower arrangement and so on. The catch phrase "*Eigo purasu arufa*," literally "English + α" was evocative of this trend.

Some people also made bold, life-changing decisions to quit their jobs and study abroad. Many wanted to be able to boast that they had experienced life overseas directly, or enjoy a light-hearted working holiday abroad. With Japan's low unemployment rate, people of the time were confident of finding work upon their return to Japan.

After the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990's, for a period of time the number of Japanese studying abroad continued to grow. According to the statistics by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry (MEXT), the number of Japanese students studying abroad peaked in 2004. However, money became tighter for most Japanese parents, who tended to fund most study abroad expenses. Mid-career professionals today tend to be more reluctant in their attitude toward study abroad. Fewer of them are deciding to go overseas. However, it is striking how some persons have a steadfast determination to study abroad, surmounting the difficulties they encounter.

***How has Japan's floundering economy and strong US dollar impacted study abroad over the past ten years?***

It would seem that fewer and fewer students in Japan are in the mood to study abroad, particularly since the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy of 2008 and its ensuing financial fallout,



However, some significant trends have emerged since then. Society is becoming increasingly globalized, companies are becoming multinational, and many domestic companies are moving overseas. Moreover, much of the revenue being generated by Japanese companies is now derived from markets outside of Japan. The need for persons with multilingual and multicultural skills seems ever more acute. In response to this need, the Japanese MEXT ministry announced the “*Tobitate! Study abroad JAPAN*” campaign, which has the goal of doubling the number of Japanese students studying abroad by 2020.

Another trend in recent years has been for students to take an extended break from college to study overseas. We also see a greater diversity in terms of age ranges of those studying abroad: more and more young people are opting to do this.

As you are no doubt aware, to obtain academic credits for studying abroad, it is necessary to enroll in a program at an authorized partner university. The process of credit authorization does not usually involve a delay in terms of the projected graduation date if students enroll in such programs. Some students take a leave of absence from their universities in Japan to attend a school they desire. Although their graduation dates are typically delayed, they can experience a variety of things through university extension courses such as overseas business internships. In such cases, the program time span is usually from six months to one year.

Younger study abroad participants tend to be high school students. Many of them attend short-term language school programs during their summer vacations. Such programs often feature international exchanges with a focus on language learning and engaging activities. Of course, some high school students studying abroad are also aiming to obtain graduation diplomas. High school students tend to be surprisingly motivated, with parents often encouraging them to pursue studies overseas.

Also, we are gradually seeing more and more older adults who have finished their child-rearing duties and are seeking to fulfill their long-term dreams of studying abroad.

***Although most of our readers are familiar with the Ryugaku Journal, many do not know about other publications by you company. Could you describe those?***

Since 1991 we’ve published a “Study Abroad White Paper,” which is an annual summary of study abroad trends in Japan based on our in-house surveys. Its roots go back to 1988 with our annual “Study Abroad Report,” which became upgraded to a more extensive publication that outlines travel destinations and avowed reasons for study abroad. We also investigate various issues from year to year, such as study abroad anxieties or worries. This provides a detailed statistical profile of study abroad trends, which may interest those who are keen on study abroad.

For example many (if not most people) come to us with the United States as their first choice travel destination. However, they often end up choosing Canada as their final destination. The reason for this is because student visas are required for even short term stays in the USA, but not in Canada.

We are always analyzing new study abroad trends. One trend is that more Japanese are seeking to use their study abroad experiences to fulfill their future career aspirations.

***Could you briefly mention how the Ryugaku Journal differs from other publications in Japanese about study abroad?***

Recently in Japan books and other publications about study abroad tend to come out every year or so. Our publication is unique in that it hits the shelves regularly every three months.

Many such publications tend to lump together many study abroad related themes in a broad manner, but our magazine seeks to offer a more fine-grained focus on study abroad. We



seek to address themes such as study abroad planning, choosing study abroad destinations, and fostering a transformative study abroad experience for the benefit of those thinking of venturing overseas. Moreover, since this is after all a magazine, glitz is important and we try to avoid "stiff" content and maintain a light-hearted tone. We attempt to depict study abroad in a colourful way with many illustrations rather than as a stodgy, serious affair.

### ***What advice would you give to students who are thinking of studying abroad?***

First, I encourage all persons to study abroad, even if for only a short period. Now lots of information about most travel abroad destinations can be downloaded from the internet, so sojourners seldom lack factual details about their target destinations. However, knowing facts about a place and experiencing it directly are often quite different.

When reflecting on study abroad and listening to the reasons that people undertake overseas journeys, it seems as if many people are expecting to somehow change who they are, to become capable of communicating with foreigners, as well as many other goals. Study abroad involves a thirst for inner transformation, and this frequently entails a certain amount of emotional drama. A yearn to become more proficient at English, to obtain more knowledge, to cultivate "international awareness," to become more assertive, to question prior values in fresh environments are but some of the aspirations many study abroad participants carry. In the process of studying abroad people often have to confront adverse circumstances with a lot of cultural and language barriers, and overcoming these is necessary for success. However, dealing with such affairs can be a greatly broadening experience. Study abroad can give us the opportunity to engage with new vistas and the courage to do new things. If you want to engage in inner transformation, by all means travel around the world.

***Finally, many Japanese people are interested in knowing about celebrities who have studied abroad. In some ways, celebrities are trendsetters. I remember that the talk show host Tetsuko Kuroyanagi studied acting at Mary Tarcai's studio in New York City in 1971. Can you mention any other famous Japanese celebrities whose lives have changed as a result of study abroad?***

There are so many examples that I'm unsure of whom to mention. Actress and television announcer Mari Sekine was the valedictorian of her class at Emerson College in Massachusetts. Hikaru Utada, a singer, obtained an early entry to Columbia University, but dropped out midway and actor Shota Matsuda studied in England. There are a number of others who have studied overseas privately and have been able to connect their experience to current successes in the entertainment industry.

### **Works Cited**

Ryugaku Journal. (2015). *Study Abroad White Paper*. Tokyo: Ryugaku Journal.

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