Short-Term Student Exchange from 2011 to 2013 for Aspiring Globalization of Engineering Students in Niigata University

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Japanese government has started its “Short-Stay and Short-Visit scholarship programs” from 2011. The objective of the programs is to support students to visit a foreign country for less than three months and to inspire their globalized minds. The authors believe that the short-term exchange has already proved to be very effective to encourage the students to start international activities. Indeed, our “Two-week Summer School” in engineering fields has proved that a short term international exchange works as an initiator for the students’ interest. In this article the authors will report their international exchange activities of Niigata University from 2011, including a comparison with the previously held activities.

1. Introduction

In 2011, the Japanese Student Services Organization (JASSO) set up the so-called “Short-Stay” and “Short-Visit” scholarship programs (SS-SV programs) to encourage Japanese university for sending and/or accepting students to study abroad, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan. Japanese students especially, are depicted as showing hesitancy, or a decided lack of interest in studying abroad, compared with students in other Asian countries, or even Japanese students of a decade ago. So, the Japanese government and academia worry about potential adverse effects on the Japanese economy and society in general, if such attitudes persist. The objective of “SS-SV programs” is to provide logistical support for students who want to visit foreign countries, for study or pleasure. Thus short-stay/short-visit is expected to work as a preparatory step for longer study abroad.

Recognizing the importance of these short-term visits, the Faculty of Engineering, Niigata University, Japan (NU-FE) established a relationship with Otto-von-Guericke-University, in Magdeburg, Germany in 1994, and instituted the “Two-week Summer School” program in 1996(1)-(4). Since that time, we have seen more than 270 students engage in the “Two-week Summer School”. We have also sponsored more than 50 students, for stays longer than three months(5)-(6). On the basis of the success of these activities, Niigata University applied the “SS-SV programs” and organized exchanges of another 30 students, in fiscal year (FY) 2011 when JASSO started its “SS-SV programs”. In FYs 2012 and 2013, we brokered exchanges of a total of 35 students. Believing that this type of short-term exchange could prove to be a very effective means of encouraging students in engineering fields to take an active role in international activities, the authors are working to increase those numbers. In this article we will report the 2011 and 2012 “SS-SV” international exchange activities of Niigata University, including a comparison with the previously held “Two-week Summer School” activities.

2. Our program

Thus far, we have exchanged more than 270 students in our Summer School program, and more
than 50, for more extended (longer than 90-day) periods. These numbers have already proved that this kind of short-term exchange is effective for motivating students to study in foreign universities, for longer periods. Unfortunately, we had insufficient scholarships for the longer stay students until FY2010. So, we applied to JASSO for three different programs; the Two-Week-Summer-School program, the 40-Day-Stay Language-Oriented program, and the 70-Day-Stay Engineering-Oriented program. Because more than 35 individuals expressed an interest in the Magdeburg/Niigata university exchange program, in 2012, we had no problem collecting a sufficient number of good candidate students. As to why so many students were interested in these foreign exchange programs, one reason was, that students who had participated in previous Summer School programs then went on to apply for the extended seminars. Another was that former participants made quite an impression on their friends, as they described their experiences in the foreign university. We believe the latter effect was actually stronger than the former, in attracting newcomers.

Our Summer School activities include visits to university laboratories (Fig.1) as well as local factories; German- or Japanese-language classes (Fig.2) and cultural courses including visits to places of historical importance (Fig.3). We also have students organize discussion-groups focusing on their studies and general fields of interest. These may be conducted either in English, or their own language, by consensus.
At first, the German students’ summer school program presented the greatest challenge, due to a lack of available accommodations in Niigata University. But, when we asked local citizens to open their homes to us, more than enough people volunteered to act as host-families, and the visiting students all remarked that their stays with the families was by far the most enjoyable part of their overall summer-school experience (Fig.4).

We held several meetings to discuss our international activities with the exchange students, and our candidate students for the next series of exchange programs in FY2012 and FY2013. Our Japanese and German students showed everyone their pictures and “home-movies” of their experiences during Summer School and their SS-SV stays.

3. Effectiveness of short-term visit to encourage students to go abroad

Some of students’ impressions of the Summer School program appear in the questionnaire, below. Among the Japanese students who visited Germany, we discover that they were strongly impacted by the experience of suddenly being forced to communicate in a foreign language (English); (See: Comments: J1, J2, J4, J5, J6, J7, J8, and J9.) The authors think, and some of the students indeed pointed out, that the reason for this lies in the fact that people in Japan have, until recently, had little contact with outsiders, and little, if any opportunity (or need) to communicate in a foreign language, such as English. Also high-school-level English lessons still concentrate on rote memorization, and writing exercises, when they should instead be focusing their efforts on developing communications skills. Some students wrote about their interest in foreign culture and society (J3, J5, J8) and about relevance to major (J3, J6). The German students who visited Japan mostly wrote about the many differences in the culture/society (G1, G2, G3, G4) and about relevance to major (G1, G2, G3).

Japanese Student 1 (J1, Engineering student):

In the home-stay, we could experience German culture directly, and we were able to hone communication skills in English. Before I joined the “summer school” program, I didn’t have the confidence to communicate with outsider person. However, in this experience, I know that I can communicate well with my poor English, I have confidence now. I think this is a very good thing. I was able to learn firsthand about the importance of international experience while a student. In the dormitory, we could get a lot of knowledge by talking to each has experienced. To stay with other Japanese student, we could get a sense of reassurance and it led to a positive attitude.

Japanese Student 2 (J2: Engineering student):

The purpose that I participated in this program is reform of my sense and study of English. I had never thought that I want to go to abroad. The thing which was the biggest as the reason is because I’m not good at English. I had felt anxiety, because I can’t talk in English well. However, English is indispensable because globalization advances more from now on. Therefore I wanted to become good at English and studied abroad. Because originally this program was performed for a department of engineering and period is about two weeks, I thought easy to participate as the first studying abroad. In addition, it is also one of the participation reasons that I have heard that it is easier to catch English which Germans speak than a native.

Japanese Student 3 (J3: Engineering student):

This time, I have two reasons for having subscribed for this short-term studying abroad. In order for one, I want to know the situation of culture and the present industry of Germany. Secondly, I knew that the company in Japan observing overseas and asking for global talented people now through my job-hunting activities. And I thought that I would like to extend a view about employment. I actually went to Germany and I have many things felt by inspecting the
laboratory of the university there, observing the situation of various factories there, and being concerned with the person of a spot. First, I thought Germany was full of a sense of art. The design of many buildings is elaborate too great. And yet I received the impression that the town harmonized with nature. Moreover, the old buildings and many churches are located in a town, and the monument of the church which has collapsed at a certain disaster and wartime was installed on the street.

Japanese Student 4 (J4: Engineering student):
For me this was the first overseas trip. I began to feel it easier to study abroad by going overseas and receiving information in English, and now I want to go travel to Germany again. Through communication with local people in English and German, I improved my foreign language skills and communication skills than before joining summer school. However, I sometimes could not communicate well. So I am eager to study English and German than before with next studying abroad in mind. Furthermore, I want to interact with German people more, and understand the German culture, history, and industry. In addition, although I participated as a student of engineering, I couldn’t understand some technical things because I am second grade. So I want to go abroad again to be able to introduce my research in the near future.

Japanese Student 5 (J5, Engineering student):
I was able to feel and learn many things. Especially, the following three points affected me greatly. The first is cultural differences. By touching new culture, I was able to reaffirm the way of Japanese culture. The second is language. English was often used in sightseeing and the conversation in the home stay place. Therefore, I think ability of listening to English grew in two weeks. But, I felt it is difficult to communicate my thought above all. I think I want to focus on it from now on. As honest impressions through language, the environment without Japanese is difficult. But, thanks to it, I believe I was interested in other language and was able to improve. The third is the interaction with many people. I had a hard time to communicate with my host family. Even so, I made an effort to try to understand and communicate with gestures and facial expressions. By involved with various people, I was able to grow humanly.

Japanese Student 6 (J6, Engineering student):
Although it is said often that Japanese people cannot speak English, We have little opportunity that we communicate with foreign people. I would like to interchange with a foreign student positively by the student life of the future remainder so that English can be used even if it becomes a member of society. It is Volkswagen too that is impressive by the factory tour. We saw the manufacturing process and very impressed.

Japanese Student 7 (J7, Engineering student):
Exchange program of this time was very exciting for me. I was half the fun and anxiety half at first, but my fears are no longer by going to various places or talking to various people. However, I think that it might be of enjoyed more if I speak English more. I feel the words are really important again.

Japanese Student 8 (J8, Engineering student):
I was able to experience a different culture by living together in the home of Germany. This program was a short period of two weeks, but I was able to experience good things more than I expected. At the same time I was extremely aware of the low level of my English. I felt the need to continue studying of English.

Japanese Student 9 (J9, German Language Course Student):
In various situations I felt strongly how poor my English and German are. And I decided to
study harder after this summer school. I will continue studying, keeping in mind this feeling. And I will visit Germany again in the near future.

German Student 1 (G1):
I took courses in Japanese corporate management. Japanese corporate management gave me a good insight into the Japanese working habits and company structures as well as the Japanese mind in general. I figured that there are a lot of cultural differences between western countries and Japan which can potentially cause problems in working life between westerners and Japanese, if one is not aware of these differences. Thus, the course opened up my mind concerning these challenges, which will hopefully come in handy in my future life.

German Student 2 (G2):
This is a report about my 70-days stay at Niigata University and what I experienced in that period. I had a great time in Niigata where I stayed in the International House. I came to Japan to experience the culture and life and try to absorb as much of it as I could and I think I succeeded. The stay gave me many invaluable memories which will be a huge help for me and my future career because I can now compare studying in Germany and studying in a foreign country. There are not too many differences but I really liked the fact that in Japan the laboratory is not only a workplace but also a living place. All my colleagues put their shoes off before entering and ate there, cooked there and some even slept there. These things would never happen in Germany. Furthermore I liked the idea that every student has his own research project for which he is responsible.

German Student 3 (G3):
Traveling to Japan was one of the best things in my life. I learned so many different things about Japan, people, technology and many more, also I learned a lot about my own personality. For my professional development spending time in a different country is always a good opportunity to enhance the understanding of personalities and exchanging of information and experiences. Also I maybe can use my connections in my later profession.

German Student 4 (G4):
Overall, I have grown as an individual in many ways. This study abroad program has allowed me to gain a more complete sense of independence and a curiosity for the rest of the world, while eliminating much of the judgment and bias from my mindset that I had going into the program. There are so many more places around the world that I have always wanted to visit based on beautiful pictures I have seen, but I have learned that it is not just the aesthetic beauty of a foreign country that is valuable to me. It is the beauty of the feeling you get being there in a world unimaginable and indescribable that matters the most.

The different responses of the German and Japanese students to their overseas “adventures” would seem to suggest that several elements are at-play, in the discussion; but, for Japanese students, the biggest barrier is undoubtedly their serious lack of English communications skills. We think we can remove their “fear” of foreign language communication by making an appropriate preparatory step for short term, in which teachers can support the students when necessary but for some cases (e.g. during homestay) the students must manage by themselves. After such experience in the preparatory step, the students realized the importance of communication in English and renewed their will to learn it, as found indeed in their impression shown below. Also we think that the choice of the partner country is a key of success; English is a foreign language both in Japan and in Germany, thus the people in both countries know the difficulty in communication in English and manage to communicate from a viewpoint of non-native speakers. For German students, the barrier of communication in English seems to be
less pronounced.

Once the Japanese students joined the preparatory step (Summer School), their barrier to go abroad seems to be removed, but the remaining problem is how to encourage students to join the preparatory step. We believe that the financial support is important for the students who can study in foreign countries, but we also believe that it is of the utmost importance, that the students who have previously taken part in the Summer School program share their successful experiences with other students. Because the comments of peers can carry more weight, than those of their professors, who may, -or may not have actually had similar experiences. Therefore, continuing the exchange activity is considered to be another key factor; once the transfer of information between students stops, we will need huge effort to restart the activity to overcome the barriers of communication in English and apprehension of going abroad that the students may have in their mind.

4. Conclusion

Based on positive responses from former Summer School participants, the Faculty of Engineering at Niigata University has more students expressing a strong desire to study abroad than ever before, while, curiously, the opposite appears to be true, for the rest of the country. It is our strongly-held belief that in order to facilitate these exchanges, accurate and timely information as well as adequate financial support must be provided.

Another, far bigger problem, in Japanese universities, is their seeming intractability, regarding overseas study. Not just the students, but also young research assistants and associate professors are under an inordinate amount of pressure to “produce”, leaving little or no time to even consider opportunities for international exchanges. Other recent evolving processes are seeing Japanese universities’ “Chair system” creating divisions in the relationship between professors and associate professors. So, we are extremely concerned, that this will negatively impact young associate professors’ chances of taking their sabbatical years.

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References


