



## An interview with Yumiko Akeba: Working towards the transferability of credits from long-term study abroad

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The Study Abroad Foundation (SAF) is a non-profit organization headquartered in the USA, founded by the Institute for Study Abroad at Butler University. Since 2008 Yumiko Akeba has worked in the Japan Office of that foundation, helping Japanese universities to offer high-quality, integrated academic and intensive language study abroad opportunities for students. This interview was conducted on March 5, 2009 in Kyoto.

*What specifically does the SAF do?*

Well, the basic idea is to build a network between Japanese and overseas universities, so that students can study abroad and bring credits back to Japan. That's the basic concept that has worked in North America and Europe, and given time to develop and work with universities in Asia, we feel that the SAF can be successful in creating a similar model here. It's been really challenging in Japan, however, because the educational culture in Japan is so different from that of Europe and North America. Here in Japan, there are many students who want to go abroad to study and then bring credits back to their universities, but the system at Japanese universities for accepting foreign credits is very complicated, and it can be quite difficult. In addition, many students choose to study subjects overseas that aren't related to their majors, and this can cause problems with credit transfer as well. We hope to be able to assist with this process.

*Yes, for students, having their credits made transferable is a really good thing. I taught a student last year, who had been to Australia for a year to study on an academic course at university, and when he came back to university all his friends had graduated and found jobs. He was a year behind, even though he had almost certainly learned more in that year than his friends had.*

The thing is that a lot of university students here go abroad to study for a few weeks during summer vacation, and they have a good experience, but they are left wanting more. The problem is they don't want to sacrifice a whole year because they're worried about their job hunting and therefore they feel they have to finish school in four years. We try to work with universities to join our network and allow their students to go abroad for a semester or a year and then come back and transfer credit so that they can graduate with their friends. We have a lot of universities that are very interested in our program, but it really takes time to develop in Japan. We first need to educate the international centers and the professors about the benefits of working with the SAF, but due to the structure of Japanese universities there often need to be many committee meetings before work can begin, and sometimes a decision can't be easily reached. It can be very frustrating at times, both for the SAF and for the staff at the Japanese universities.

The interesting thing is that at many of the large universities in Japan, the number of students that go abroad to study on official university programs could be less than 50 a year, but up to five hundred students might just disappear for one year. They take a one-year leave of absence and many of them go abroad to study during this time. They know they won't be able to transfer their credits due to the strict Japanese system, so they just give up and take an extra year to graduate. Many Japanese universities are doing very little to support these students in their goals of study abroad. I imagine the older universities are more likely stay with the same time-honoured traditions. They are probably more resistant to change.

*It's a real shame. I spent a year abroad when I was at university on the ERASMUS scheme in Poland. It was one of the best experiences in my life. I think everyone should have that opportunity.*

Yes, me too. You're from England, aren't you? The president of our foundation worked for many years at British universities, so we've been able to learn a great deal about the educational system and study abroad opportunities in the UK. A lot of universities in Korea have joined our network, but we're still trying to recruit more in Japan. The Korean universities seem to be much more aggressive at getting what they want when compared to the universities in Japan.

A lot of Japanese universities are members of the Japan Network for International Education (JAFSA), and they are keen on the internationalization of Japanese universities in theory, but they tend to focus on research or post-graduate programs, or even more often on short-term vacation programs. Many universities really seem to be at a loss as to what to do to provide more long-term study opportunities to students at the undergraduate level. The SAF has chosen to focus on undergraduate student mobility, because if you have the opportunity go abroad when you are nineteen or twenty it can be such a great experience. If you go abroad in your late twenties the cultural impact is much different, as often by your late twenties it can be difficult to change the way you think. I went abroad when I was 21, and I believe that for me even that was too late.

*Does SAF provide the whole package for students?*

Yes. We don't provide any short-term programs at the moment, but students have the opportunity to study abroad for one semester or for an academic year. We offer three types of programs. One allows students to take undergraduate courses and to study alongside local students for up to two semesters. The second type is for students who have not yet reached a high enough score on the TOEFL® or IELTS™ to go directly into undergraduate study. These students first take an intensive ESL course for up to one semester and then they enter the official undergraduate course in their second semester abroad. The third option is for students who really want to focus on improving their English ability, and this allows students to study intensive ESL for a semester or up to a year. The programs are quite flexible, and students can choose their length of study and type of course based on their motivations and language level. SAF works with universities to provide comprehensive program fees that include tuition and housing in one package.

Especially in the US, many universities do not want to accept more exchange students than they have now, but the SAF Headquarters in America has negotiated with the universities to provide specially developed visiting student programs, giving a greater number of students the opportunity to study abroad and to bring academic credits back to Japan with them. But it is still up to the Japanese universities whether they accept the credit or not. That is the difficult part. We're trying to work with the universities to develop systems that make it easier for students to study abroad.

*You want students to go through their universities and their universities to contact you.*

Yes, that's the idea. However, in Japan often the students move much faster than the universities, so many students from various universities have found out about us through word of mouth and have approached us directly. We can't really turn them down because they want to have a chance to study abroad and we want to help them. But our ultimate goal is to form partnerships with universities in Japan and to link them to programs at universities in other countries.

*You have connections with Australia and the UK as well, don't you?*

Yes, at the moment we work with approximately 50 universities in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Ireland. We've begun a few programs in other countries as well, such as Spain, France, Switzerland, Germany, China and Korea, and in the future we hope that students from China and Korea will be able to come to Japan through the SAF, but that's going to take another five or ten years of planning.

*Australia and New Zealand seem to be getting more popular with students.*

Yes, they are very popular in Japan. They are reasonably inexpensive and there is very little time difference. The cost of tuition at overseas universities is often a problem, because even in Australia and New Zealand it seems very expensive compared to Japanese universities.

*Exchange programs seem to be the most economical way for students to go abroad. But they seem to be very limited in terms of how many students can go.*

Yes, it is only the best students who can go, and there is often a lot of competition for the limited number

*Are the requirements for entering the foreign universities about the same? TOEFL 550 or near?*

At some universities in the SAF Network, such as Columbia or Middlebury, students need to have a TOEFL score of 600. At British universities students need at least 550. Some of the American universities have set the TOEFL requirement as low as 500, such as the University of Utah and the University of Hawaii, and they provide additional language support to students as they take undergraduate classes. Many students want to join undergraduate classes without having the necessary TOEFL score, but at each university there are specific reasons for setting the TOEFL requirements as they do, and at each institution if students have less than the requirement it would be difficult to keep up with the academic classes.

*If they are enrolled on an academically demanding course, then even with 550 they are going to find it very difficult.*

Students often have to give presentations and study in the library and it is hard. Japanese students in particular are often not used to studying in such an intensive way, especially when it comes to the amount of reading that students need to do at overseas universities. We have counselors who interview perspective students and tell them how hard it will be before they go abroad, and the SAF works to provide students with information about how to study effectively in an overseas institution. It is not fair to let them go without properly preparing them and having them think that their student life abroad will be like their student life at Japanese university.

*Is that the main role of the counselor?*

Well, students usually come to the SAF with only a very vague idea of where they want to go and what they want to study. Our counselors have to guide them, and help them choose the most appropriate path. This often includes helping them decide not only which university to go to but also what to study while abroad. We find it difficult to assist students who are going abroad with the intention of avoiding study and who are thinking of the experience as an extended vacation. We have



developed strong partnerships with our networked universities, and we don't want to ruin our relationships by sending poorly motivated students. One role of the SAF counselors is to tell them the reality of studying abroad and make sure they are still interested. We are not working as an agent, but rather as a foundation based on a cooperative partnership with our network of universities, so we have to be ethical when dealing with students.

*So you have to maintain your standards.*

Yes, both our standards towards our partner universities and our standards towards the level of student experience and satisfaction.

*Do you just offer academic counseling?*

Our program has an academic focus, but we also offer advice about living in a foreign country and about how to get the best cultural experience out of their time abroad. We run a pre-departure orientation program for students, and also offer students support while they are abroad.

*Have your students had many problems?*

When dealing with a large number of students going overseas, there are always going to be students who have personal problems, as well as issues that need to be worked out with the host universities. We do our best to make sure that students are taken care of and that problems are solved quickly. When students are living overseas for the first time, there's always going to be a factor of culture shock, which in some cases can lead to various levels of depression, and if students are living in a dormitory with roommates, there are always going to be some cultural issues arising from that.

*I have heard some pretty terrible stories, where students have had much more serious reactions to life overseas. I think there should be a lot more counseling of students before they go abroad with a particular focus on mental health.*

Most of the Japanese universities we have been working with are really worried about support and security, and also for many Japanese universities the high cost of study abroad is the other main focus. They aren't really aware how much it costs to study at universities overseas. We try to negotiate special fees for our students to make it more affordable, but even when we are able to negotiate such fees a year of study abroad it is still by no means cheap.

A few very talented students can sometimes receive scholarships to go abroad, but unfortunately the availability of scholarships to students from Japan is quite limited.

*It sounds like you have a lot of challenges to overcome to achieve your aims, but I think it sounds like a really noble cause, and I hope you will be successful. Thank you for agreeing to do the interview.*



## Japan Association for Language Teaching Study Abroad Special Interest Group

全国語学教育学会海外研修研究支部会

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