



Study Abroad Perspectives: An Interview with Brett Rumminger **by Karen Yabuno**

Brett Rumminger has been the director of the Study Abroad Foundation Japan Office since 2006. He has a B.A. in East Asian Languages and Cultures and a B.S. in Electrical Engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Brett spent one year studying at Waseda University and an additional year at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies (Stanford University) in Yokohama as an international research student. This interview was conducted by email during the spring of 2014.

Can you tell me a little about the Study Abroad Foundation (SAF)?

SAF was founded in 2000 and is a chartered non-profit organization based in Indiana, USA. All income including grants and benefits are used to develop the foundation and strengthen its international network. The Institute for Study Abroad, Butler University assisted in the establishment of SAF as part of its mission to strengthen international student mobility.

SAF's purpose is to provide high quality study abroad opportunities for qualified tertiary students enrolled at member universities. There are currently 181 SAF member universities (115 home universities and 66 host universities). The majority of students study abroad for one year or one semester in undergraduate academic classes alongside domestic students, but certain programs also include language learning or an internship component as part of the curriculum. SAF works with home universities to allow students to earn transfer credit for their study abroad experience to the fullest extent possible.

SAF has 15 staff members based in Japan. Approximately 4,200 students from Asian universities have participated in semester or yearlong SAF study programs since 2007. In the previous year, about 1,150 students participated in a SAF study abroad program. Thirty percent of the students came from Japan.

What are some benefits for SAF's member universities?

Member universities work with SAF to share resources and to develop the specialized knowledge, skills, and systems necessary for study abroad to be a strong part of their curricula. The purpose is to enable member university partners to effectively and professionally respond to increased and more specialized demand for study abroad opportunities by their students. Often this involves serving students for whom there are insufficient places in bilateral exchange and other programs. For some universities, the opportunities provided through SAF membership will be central to their internationalization and student mobility plans, while for other universities, membership will supplement well-developed and long-standing programs.

Working in this way is relatively new to universities in Asia, and as such SAF and member universities are pioneering a new model to increase international student mobility. Considerable progress has been made with SAF and its member universities experiencing good annual rates of increase in student participation in study abroad. The SAF model has worked well in Asia, notably in Japan.

What prompted your interest in working for a study abroad program?



I had several opportunities to study abroad in Japan through programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where I completed my undergraduate studies. After graduation, I worked in Japan on the JET Programme as both an ALT and CIR. After that, I began working for a Japanese study abroad agency in 2000.

I was never fully satisfied in my work as a study abroad agent, so when the opportunity arose to work with SAF, I shifted my focus to providing opportunities to students in partnership with universities and within a strong educational environment. It is within this context that I am currently working as director of the SAF Japan Office.

What trends have you noticed with Japanese students studying abroad in general?

There has been discussion in the media in recent years suggesting Japanese students have become inward looking and consequently many are failing to take full advantage of opportunities to study abroad, but from our experience, this does not appear to be the case. I believe Japanese university students have always been interested in studying overseas. Whether or not they are able to actually study abroad depends greatly upon how much financial support is provided by their home universities and the Japanese government. Even within the current exchange program system, study abroad can be expensive, and as overseas educational and living costs rise and income disparities in Japan widen, the number of Japanese students who can afford to do so may be decreasing.

We have found that certain universities are becoming better equipped than others to handle the diverse needs of students when it comes to study abroad. These universities have been making changes to their financial systems—most importantly, how home university tuitions are assessed while students are studying abroad on non-exchange programs. Many have revised their credit-transfer systems, which have frequently been barriers to university students going abroad. Through such progressive changes, some of the universities SAF is working with have been able to significantly increase the number of their students heading overseas. Unfortunately, some universities appear to be entrenched in a more conservative environment that does not meet the ever-changing needs and demands of their students.

In recent years, we have also seen increased interest in overseas internship programs as well as in programs that combine language education with university-level coursework. Perhaps this is because both of these program types are not readily available through traditional exchange frameworks.

SAF offers undergraduate, graduate, and international career development programs. Which of these is the most popular?

Our undergraduate program – which includes both language and academic courses – is the most popular. However, we have seen increased interest in long-term overseas internship programs or in programs with internship components. Gaining home university approval to allow students to study on these programs has been problematic, though. SAF is currently working with several universities to create short-term overseas career development programs, which will focus on career exploration and/or corporate projects overseas. We expect that these will attract many Japanese students.

Study abroad at the graduate level can be quite tricky, as it is not a simple task to align the curriculum and research areas of home universities with their overseas counterparts. SAF sees a large number of students interested in graduate study overseas, particularly from Mainland China. However, the best way for SAF to currently serve these students is to provide them with undergraduate study opportunities that may link to acceptance into a graduate school abroad. From Japan, perhaps due to differences in the job market, SAF does not see as many students interested in graduate study overseas as compared to the other countries. We find that in Mainland China, and to a lesser extent in Taiwan and Korea, companies place a high value on students receiving Master's or PhD degrees abroad. It is



becoming more and more expected that prospective employees have such qualifications. In Japan, companies are still very focused on the hiring of students immediately after completion of their bachelor's degrees, and outside of certain fields there is relatively little perceived value for prospective employees receiving advanced degrees overseas. It is for such reasons we see many more of our Chinese students using study abroad as a steppingstone to advanced degrees compared to Japan.

How have trends and demand for your programs changed in recent years?

As SAF works closely with Japanese universities to supplement and expand their study abroad opportunities, the trends and demand for SAF programs are closely linked with the policies and initiatives of SAF member universities in Japan. Over the past several years we have seen positive change in some Japanese universities becoming more flexible in how they develop study abroad programs and how they approve study abroad and transfer credit. We have also seen positive improvements in the financial systems related to the cost of study abroad. In concrete terms, at certain universities these improvements have involved awarding credit to study abroad for students wishing to combine intensive language study with undergraduate coursework. Also, the establishment of a quarter system in Japan has provided additional opportunities for students to study abroad. Finally, the waiving of home university tuition fees while students are studying abroad at approved programs has also been a positive move.

That said, in general, it is often quite challenging to get faculty committee approval of proposals from university international offices. Some committee members are not fully informed or sufficiently motivated to advance internationalization. As a consequence, it is sometimes difficult to see progress. We look forward to continuing discussions with interested Japanese universities about how to establish internal systems that will allow and encourage more students to study abroad.

Is the Japanese government doing anything to promote study abroad?

MEXT has initiated several funding programs over the past few years to provide universities with the resources necessary to further internationalization. In addition, MEXT has provided universities with increased autonomy and flexibility as to how they may internationalize their campuses or expand their study abroad opportunities, including the recommendation to make use of international university networks such as SAF.

What we have seen is that while through such initiatives MEXT is providing the funding and flexibility for universities to further their internationalization efforts, some universities may not be fully prepared to handle the increased flexibility. Others may not know how to best make use of the funding. Therefore, the full benefits of the government initiatives may not have been realized. Regarding the current funding projects, the final outcomes remain to be seen. The worst-case scenario is that when funding runs out, the initiatives will come to a halt. Our goal therefore is of course to use funding to create self-sustaining models that will continue to benefit students long after the initial funding has expired.

What impact (if any) is the 2014 UK ETS scandal having on study abroad programs?

Unfortunately, we have come to expect a certain level of surprise in the UK policies regarding student visas. The recent issues related to the acceptance of TOEFL and TOEIC scores for student visas did not cause problems for SAF students in terms of their Fall 2014 admissions. However, it did create a great deal of confusion that left students feeling unsupported in their valid efforts to study in Great Britain. For several weeks after the initial announcement there were conflicting reports from various



sources, including our partner universities in the UK. It took some time to sort through the information and assess the actual situation. Provided that students now have concrete information as to the current situation regarding visas, I do not believe that the situation will have an impact on SAF student numbers to the UK for 2015, but it is one more factor that shows the importance of students thinking ahead and being prepared for sudden changes in policy which may affect their plans.

Where do you see future demands for study abroad programs?

It is difficult to predict, but I see student demand for study programs overseas continuing to rise, particularly regarding long-term study abroad. We have seen an increased interest in international career development programs, including overseas academic internship programs, but whether this trend continues relates to how corporations in Japan recognize and evaluate overseas experience. While some companies have definitely changed over the past several years, there are still a good number of major corporations in Japan who seem to place little emphasis on international experience or study abroad, and if the stance of these companies does not change, student demand in turn may remain stagnant or even decrease.

In addition, while the demand for study abroad is primarily driven by students, it is in fact controlled by universities, through policies and procedures which are often based on a past track record rather than a forward-thinking agenda. Japanese universities need to make efforts to fully understand the true needs of their students and then have the flexibility that will allow the universities to effectively develop and administer programs on a large scale. At the moment, there are still relatively few universities in Japan fully equipped to handle this.

It is SAF's hope that both universities and corporations will take a more progressive approach, thinking five and ten years down the line rather than in the immediate future, and that we will see the structural changes necessary to allow the future needs and demands of the students to be met.