

RYUGAKU

STUDY ABROAD N-SIG NEWSLETTER

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Message from the Coordinator

Dear Members,

The third edition of our newsletter has been a while coming, but we think it was worth the wait.

We now have a full set of officers and we are in the process of getting our status changed from 'forming' SIG to 'affiliate' SIG. We meet all the requirements to become a 'full' SIG, but must wait another year for that. We hope to have our motion passed at the next JALT executive board meeting in June. Becoming an 'affiliate' SIG will mean we have more security, but will still not be able to vote at national level meetings.

We have been trying to improve *Ryugaku* to make it a publication that is really a worthwhile read that provides SIG members with up-to-date research and news about everything to do with studying abroad. I would like to encourage you to send us your research or any other items that will be of interest to our members. We hope to be able to keep standards high, and this issue's feature article is an excellent example of the quality of research we are looking for. We hope you find it informative and interesting.

Over the next few weeks, all SIG members with current email addresses will receive an invitation to our 'Ning' networking site. We envisage this being a friendly, informal place where any issues or concerns regarding studying abroad can be freely and collaboratively discussed.

The Pan-SIG conference is upon us this weekend (May 23rd and 24th), and this looks to be a really exciting event for us. We have a dedicated room, with presentations filling both days. This is a really big achievement for such a new SIG, and I am very proud to see so much interest from our members. If you are in the Kanto area, please try to attend and support the SIG.

Meet the SA SIG Executive Team



Coordinator Andrew Atkins	Publicity/Program Chair Todd Thorpe	Membership Chair Russell Hubert	Treasurer Mark Jones	Publications Chair Derek Eberl
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Japanese University Students' Assessment of a Collaborative Field Study Program Abroad

Brenda Bushell
University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo

Introduction

Educators have recognized for many years that university students returning from study abroad show positive changes, both in the cognitive and affective domains. They often identify improvements in terms of concern about international affairs, appreciation of different cultures, self-awareness, independence and maturation (Jones & Bond 2000). Much of the research literature on the impact of study abroad on North American students finds that participants in study abroad programs acquire global mindedness, grow intellectually and develop personally (Cash, 1993; Hadis 2005; Hansen 2002; McCabe 1994). Research also identifies various kinds of second language acquisition gains through study abroad (Kline 1998; Rivers 1998). Based on these findings we can postulate that study abroad can open a window to the wider world for students, and in addition, promote personal growth. Although the number and type of study abroad programs offered by Japanese universities has been increasing over the past decade or more, there have been few studies to track the cognitive and affective determinates from the perspective of students. The purpose of this article is to describe one study abroad program modeled on collaborative, student-centered learning and student leadership. It reports on student responses through a descriptive questionnaire in order to understand the impacts of the study abroad program on the students and the growth which results from it.

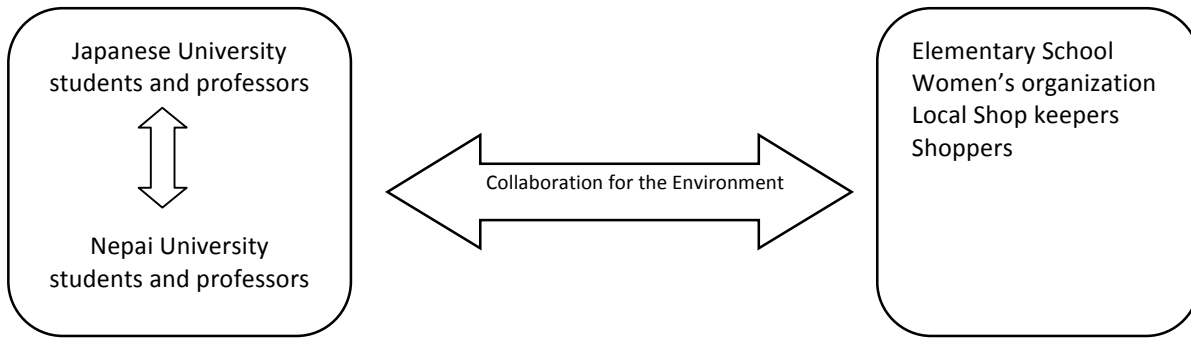
The Study Program: Field Study Program in Nepal

Over the past five years (2004-2008), the Nepal Field Study Program has been evolving to address the affective and cognitive domains of students at a private university located in the Yokohama area. Approximately ten new students sign up for the program each year, with four to five students returning for a second or third time. Awarded funding since 2004 by the Ministry of Education Science Sports and Culture of Japan, the program is envisioned as a collaborative and interdisciplinary student-centered learning experience. The Nepal field study program has four broad objectives which include developing

- intercultural understanding of an interest in a developing country,
- an understanding of the interface between social and environmental issues in the context of Nepal,
- communication skills and collaborative teamwork,
- personal skills such as leadership and self-direction.

Developed around a dynamic learning community, the program is directed toward collaborative learning and action research in the sectors of environment and education (Bushell & Goto, 2006). By definition, a learning community is a style of learning in which the general goal is to give students opportunities to experience different perspectives, to develop approaches on integrating these different perspectives and, to focus on the strategies for connecting diverse people as well as diverse disciplines (Gabelnick, et al. 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The learning community for the field study program in Nepal includes students from a private university majoring in development studies, elementary school children and their teachers, a community women's environmental group, as well as shopkeepers and shoppers (See Figure 1). This learning community provides Japanese students with a learning network, and helps them to find and create connections between what they are learning in the university classes, and how to apply it to the real world. The model also highlights the interdisciplinary components of the program, as students exchange knowledge from differing perspectives.

Figure 1. Collaborative Model of the Nepal Field Study Program



Three-Step Approach to the Program

The strength of the field program is its three steps, which include 1) pre-program preparation, 2) field trip experience, and 3) post-program synthesis. During the preparation stage, students are introduced to Nepal and the field study program by student leaders from the previous year's program. Students are also required to read final reports submitted by students from the previous year. In addition, students are matched with their partner in Nepal, and approximately one month before departure they begin to communicate by email. Building leadership during the preparation stage is critical to the success of the program in Nepal, as students lead environment education (EE) activities at the elementary school, and also conduct interviews with the shopkeepers and shoppers. The partners, assigned to teams, work with their team members, teachers, and the previous year's leaders to develop questionnaires and EE activities, as well as take responsibility for arranging equipment such as computers, video and digital cameras to be used during the field study program. At this stage, communication between Japanese students and emails to Nepali students is vital to the success of the field activities.

During the ten-day, in-country Nepal field study program, students listen to English presentations on environmental and social problems facing the capital city Kathmandu, make observations at various sites around the city connected to waste management issues, carry out a three-day EE program at the elementary school, and gather data from shopkeepers and shoppers on the use and preferences of plastic, paper and cloth bags. The EE activities and data collection involve teamwork, including leadership roles. To maximize the field experience, students are also required to write a daily journal, lead and participate in evening discussion sessions about each day's activities, as well as update web pages.



Student leadership



Collaborative learning



Critical thought and communication

Back in Japan, the post-program synthesis consists of several reflective meetings and the writing of a field trip report based on their team's field experiences and activities. A significant part of the "synthesis" occurs when students chat informally among themselves and with others on campus about their experiences in Nepal and what they would like to do for Nepali people and the environment in the future.

Perceptions of Impacts from Student Questionnaires

A questionnaire composed of three sections along with journal responses aimed to analyze the impact the program had on the Japanese students joining the program from 2004 to 2007 (see Table 1 below). The questionnaire is a modified version of the Study Abroad Goals Scale (SAGS) (Opper, Teichler & Carlson 1990), using a 5-point Likert scale (from: 1= not at all, to: 5= very much). A total of thirty-one Japanese students responded to the questionnaire. Approximately 18 percent of the students answering the questionnaire participated in the program two times or more, while 82 percent participated one time. The first section of the questionnaire reflects the benefits the students felt from participating in the program. The highest mean score for statements in this section included "reconsider my career goals" (mean of 4.80) and "find the reason for going to my university classes" (mean of 4.61). Like so many Japanese students, students in this program often comment that they find limited interest in their class lectures and spend little time on homework assignments. Having first-hand observation of environmental problems and attempting to find a solution while in Nepal, students come back more focused and interested to build their knowledge, and to find answers to these problems in their classes back on campus.

Finding direction in life is often difficult for Japanese university students, however nearly 95% of the participants said they could get inspiration from their field experience. Student journal comments included, "It changed my idea about what to do in life. Now I want to do something for Nepali people." In fact many students continue to work for the field study program in some capacity back on campus, even though they do not participate in the program a second or third time. They help in recruiting new students to the program, provide information about what it's like to go to Nepal, and generally impart a positive feeling about the program to the new students. And although very few students actually find employment related to Nepal, one student is currently in Nepal, working as a volunteer for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), involved in environment education programs for children. Motivated by the desire to keep the partnership and memories of their experience alive after graduation, students participating in the first and second field study program (2004-2005) have now organized an alumni group and will publish their first newsletter in February, 2009.

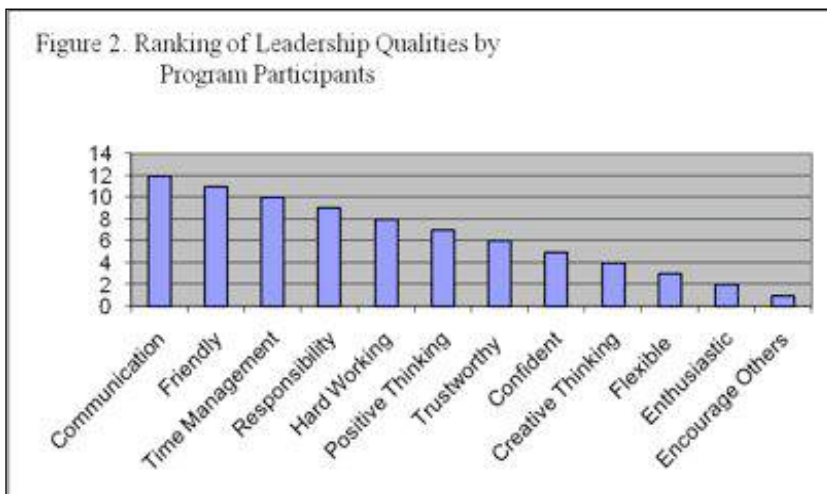
The section of the questionnaire "personal development" highlights the importance of study abroad for developing student awareness: their attitudes, beliefs and values. The highest scoring statements in this section included "increase my ability to cope with unfamiliar situations" with a mean of 4.61, followed by, "increase my open-mindedness" with a mean of 4.46, and, "increase confidence in myself" with a mean of 4.31. Experiences from working with their partner in a totally unknown situation appears to have enhanced both students' self and intercultural confidence, as well as broadened their reality of the truisms they left behind in their society. Several Japanese students expressed the program's importance as a tool for building self-confidence and the ability to interact and relate to people and situations in another culture. Assessing the overall response from the program, one student put it succinctly by responding in her journal, "This trip changed my thinking, about how different the world is, about what I can do, in my future".

Findings from the final section "intellectual development" indicate that their experiences during the field program had a somewhat powerful effect on their English language communication skills with a mean score of 4.16. While Japanese students were very concerned about their ability to communicate and understand their partner in the pre-program stage, after the second day of the program they seemed relatively comfortable and confident in their ability. This was partly due to the Nepali students, who seemed to quickly understand the language limitations of the Japanese students and adapted their speech, including shorter sentences, easier vocabulary, slower speech and more non-verbal gestures and body language. Greater awareness with regards to critical thinking and problem solving was also evident through several journal comments. Japanese students highlighted the fact that Nepali students are very good at identifying problems and aggressively stating their opinions, unlike Japanese students. Their awareness of how they need to take more responsibility for their learning came through in their journal comments, like this one. "I think I should think more deeply about environment problems like Nepali students do. If I can join this program again I want to say a lot in discussion time about the issues in Japan and Nepal."

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for 2004-2007 Field Program Participants

Statements about the program	Mean	Standard Deviation
<i>(Benefits from Joining the Program)</i>		
Reconsider my career goals	4.80	.50
Find a reason to study at university	4.61	.64
Experience intercultural communication	4.46	.63
Experience fieldwork	4.31	.75
Build academic Knowledge	4.26	.83
<i>(Personal Development)</i>		
Increased my ability to cope with unfamiliar situations	4.61	.64
Increased my open-mindedness	4.46	.63
Increased confidence in myself	4.31	.75
Encouraged me to interact with a diversity of people	4.16	.83
Made me more independent	3.26	1.05
<i>(Intellectual Development)</i>		
Increased my English communication skills	4.16	.83
Improved my research skills	3.81	.98
Improved my critical thinking skills	3.29	.93
Improved my problem solving skills	3.29	.93

As the program also aims at building leadership, a second questionnaire was administered, which included a simple ranking of leadership qualities, adapted from a leadership assessment for students at Johns Hopkins University (Thompson 2006). Based on the activities in this program, students identified "communication", "friendly approach", and "time management" to be the three most important qualities in planning and implementing their research activities in the program as illustrated in Figure 2.



With an emphasis placed on collaboration and cooperation throughout the three stages of the program, Japanese students recognized the importance of communicating, both among themselves and with their Nepali partners. They also recognized the differences in working styles and approach to time in Nepal, and, by the end of the program, had a better understanding of these cultural differences and how to work and get along in a very different working environment compared to theirs.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The purpose of this article was to describe the components of a collaborative, interdisciplinary field study program for Japanese university students and the perceptions of their learning experiences. The field study program based in Nepal, offers students unique and challenging opportunities. As evidenced by the findings, integrating components of interdisciplinary experiential learning, intercultural communication and leadership into the program design, compels students to reflect on their intellectual development and to put new value on the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom. It also gives them opportunities for personal development and leadership training and in addition, provides them with "real reasons" for communicating, hence stimulating their desire to learn English. In conclusion, this study abroad program represents a powerful educational model.

As the next phase of the program begins in 2009, development of the three phases of the program must be considered, particularly in the pre-program stage, so that students are better prepared in terms of cultural aspects, field research responsibilities, and language skills. Data from students regarding program impacts must be more rigorously collected and longitudinal studies to track

students' life choices, for example, studies in advanced degrees, career path, volunteer activities, etc. Also, more emphasis should be placed on the link between classroom study and field study activities. This requires better communication and cooperation among faculty members on campus. Finally, continued communication and collaboration between teachers in Nepal and Japan are essential for the future development of the program and progress in education.

Acknowledgement

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 were gathered by a Japanese student, Mr. Ryotaro Horiuchi, as part of his graduation thesis focusing on an evaluation of the Nepal field study program.

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Contribute to Ryugaku

Deadline for Fall Issue is August 31, 2009

(See back page for details)



Working Towards the Transferability of Credits from Long-term Study Abroad An Interview with Yumiko Akeba—The Study Abroad Foundation (SAF)

Andrew Atkins
Kyoto Sangyo University

Andrew: Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Can you tell me about your organization?

Yumiko: The Study Abroad Foundation is a US non-profit organization, founded by The Institute for Study Abroad (IFSA) at Butler University. The SAF Japan Office where I work was opened in 2006, and since that time SAF has been working with Japanese universities to offer high-quality, integrated academic and intensive language study abroad opportunities to their students.

Andrew: What specifically does SAF do?

Yumiko: 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 the USA and Europe, and given time to develop and work with universities in Asia, we feel that 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 the US. 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.

Andrew: 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.

Yumiko: 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 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 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.

Andrew: 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.

Yumiko: 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 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. 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.

Andrew: Does SAF provide the whole package for students?

Yumiko: 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.

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

Yumiko: 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.

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

Yumiko: 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 SAF, but that's going to take another five or ten years of planning.

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

- Yumiko: 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.
- Andrew: 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.
- Yumiko: Yes, it is only the best students who can go, and there is often a lot of competition for the limited number of places.
- Andrew: Are the requirements for entering the foreign universities about the same? TOEFL 550 or near?
- Yumiko: At some universities in the SAF Network, such as Columbia or Middlebury, students need to have TOEFL 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.
- Andrew: If they are enrolled on an academically demanding course, then even with 550 they are going to find it very difficult.
- Yumiko: 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 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.
- Andrew: Is that the main role of the counselor?
- Yumiko: Well, students usually come to 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.
- Andrew: So you have to maintain your standards.
- Yumiko: Yes, both our standards towards our partner universities and our standards towards the level of student experience and satisfaction.
- Andrew: Do you just offer academic counseling?
- Yumiko: 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.

Andrew: Have your students had many problems?

Yumiko: 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.

Andrew: 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.

Yumiko: 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.

Andrew: 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.

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Announcements

Submissions

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Submissions related to Study Abroad are welcome in the following categories:

1. Feature articles: 1500-3000 words
2. Ryugaku Forum (short articles and interviews): Maximum 1500 words
4. Classroom Ideas: Maximum 1500 words
5. Book reviews
6. Study abroad program reviews
7. Study abroad experiences from students: Let's hear what our students have to say!

Format for submissions:

1. Attached Microsoft Word document
2. Limit the use of bold and italics in the document

Please send all submissions and inquires about submissions by e-mail to eberl@notredame.ac.jp

Joining our SIG

Dear Prospective Members,

There are a few ways you can become a member of the Study Abroad N-SIG:

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Option 2: Join Online at <https://jalt.org/joining/>

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