Exploring the Perspectives of Online Study Abroad Programs in Japan during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Approach

Yukiyo Nishida[1,*], Atsuko Watanabe[2], Masuko Miyahara[3], Maki Ojima[4], Gaby Benthien[5], Kazuko Takano[6]

[1]School of Education, University of Aberdeen, the UK
[2]Faculty of Language and Literature, Bunkyo University, Japan
[3]English for Liberal Art Program, International Christian University, Japan
[4]Global Education Center, Waseda University, Japan
[5]Faculty of English, IT and Management, Shumei University, Japan
[6]Faculty of Arts and Letters, Meiji University, Japan

Abstract COVID-19 profoundly impacted countries worldwide between early 2020 and late 2021 due to travel restrictions, lockdowns, and health risks. Many higher education institutions responded to the health threat posed by COVID-19 by moving their on-campus programs online. Study abroad programs also needed to undergo adjustments, with some universities establishing alternative arrangements. This study uses a narrative approach to examine Online In-Country Study Abroad Program (ONIC-SAPs) from the perspective of Japan-based participants, academic, and administrative staff who were involved and participated. The program was operated by a university in Japan in collaboration with a partner university in Canada and a global language school during the height of the pandemic. The findings highlight that the advantages of ONIC-SAPs are also seen as the disadvantages of the programs. Acquiring language skills and experiencing intercultural encounters with the aid of technology may become even more common in the future, yet the extent to which this kind of learning is of benefit to all concerned should be considered. The study highlights that there is a need for further research into the content and curriculum of ONIC-SAPs to find ways to improve the value of online learning for all stakeholders, especially for study abroad programs. Although the participants were recruited from the Japanese side only, the findings will resonate with study abroad stakeholders and scholars of study abroad programs worldwide.

Keywords Online In-Country Study Abroad Program (ONIC-SAP), COVID-19, Japan's Study Abroad Policies, Stakeholder and Students' Perspectives, Advantages and Disadvantages of ONIC-SAP, Teacher Certificate Course

1. Introduction

The beginning of 2020 was marked by news stories about a new and highly infectious strain of coronavirus, later known as COVID-19. The subsequent pandemic, which resulted in travel restrictions and lockdowns, profoundly impacted both students and institutions worldwide. Many higher education institutions responded to the unforeseen health threat posed by COVID-19 by moving their on-campus academic programs online, using

digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and Microsoft Teams. Existing and future study abroad programs were also affected, with students wondering whether to return home mid-program and institutions exploring possible options if existing in-country programs could not be operated.

This study examines the first Online In-Country Study Abroad Program (ONIC-SAP) run by a Japanese university in collaboration with a Canadian partner university and a global language school during COVID-19. The research focuses on three stakeholders and their perspectives: the students who participated in these programs, the academics who supervised the programs, and the university staff who organized the programs. The advantages and disadvantages of ONIC-SAP are explored using a narrative approach which allows for rich individual experiences to explore different aspects of the ONIC-SAP. Although the participants were recruited only from Japan, the findings of this research will contribute fresh perspectives to our understanding of ONIC-SAP during the pandemic and beyond.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online Study Abroad Programs and Research Conducted During the Pandemic

Closing borders due to COVID-19 had a major effect on study abroad programs. Programs that could connect students with their peers across the globe using technology or online platforms were considered as possible replacements for traditional in-country programs [1]. Prior to the pandemic, online or virtual study abroad programs had already attracted increasing attention as they could offer intercultural learning opportunities to a broader population of students than would otherwise be able to participate in regular onsite programs. Thus, existing virtual and e-learning opportunities for intercultural learning were utilized and expanded as borders closed [2], while new and innovative ways of delivering comparable study abroad content online using the latest technology were also developed.

"Going online or virtual" has several benefits for study abroad programs, with unique experiences allowing students to engage in communicative and cultural activities to support English language study, facilitate cultural awareness, and encourage grass-roots level conflict resolution [3]. Existing Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Virtual reality (VR) technologies have been adopted to create alternative study abroad programs. According to Di Giovine and Bodinger de Uriarte [1], VR study abroad programs can provide a continuing source of revenue for higher education institutions and provide a means to attract and retain students. As Liu and Shirley [4] note, study abroad programs using COIL provide students with international

experiences without having to cross borders, while online platforms using VR technology make both remote cultural exchange and virtual cultural tours possible. Furthermore, COIL has been used in combination with traditional study abroad approaches in recent years as an additional innovative and cost-effective pedagogical learning approach to offering students pre-or-post global learning opportunities at home [4-6]. Liu and Shirley [4] also point out that COIL programs do not only provide a positive learning experience but can also assist students financially, as some institutions offer online courses at 30% of the original cost. In addition, Kosman et al. [7] report that students can gain personal and professional benefits from ONIC-SAPs without the risks and costs associated with international travel. In fact, one of the most common advantages of ONIC-SAPs highlighted is the cost of the programs. With no travel or accommodation expenses, these programs are particularly beneficial for students who are reluctant or unable to study abroad for financial reasons [8].

Research during the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on study abroad programs are now emerging. For example, Novikov [9] examines the transition to online learning at a Russian higher education institution and reports that although the majority of students preferred face-to-face instruction (86.95%), nearly one-half (47.82%) of the students felt the online experience is comparable. However, the study also draws attention to a number of negative aspects, including learning challenges related to internet connection troubles, a lack of quiet spaces to study, teacher attitudes, and online learning-induced stress and anxiety [9]. Similar positive and negative effects of online study abroad experience during the pandemic are also revealed in other studies [4, 10, 11].

2.2. The Evolving Nature of Study Abroad in Japan

Until March 2020, study abroad programs were a prominent educational component in higher education, reflecting the need for Japan to be able to be competitive in an ever-changing global arena. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) responded to this need by introducing various policies and strategies. These have the two-fold aim of ensuring that graduates possess global knowledge, skills, and employability that, in turn, will help boost Japanese global presence and competitiveness.

In Japan, English language competence is seen as a gateway to social, economic, and educational success, and students have traditionally been encouraged to obtain an overseas experience, especially in English-speaking countries, before graduating [12]. Pre-service English language teachers are, in particular, encouraged to spend time in Anglosphere countries, as study abroad programs are seen as an effective way to improve their communication skills [13]. Consequently, some universities in Japan integrate a study abroad program into

the English teacher certificate course [13]. The perceived advantages of a study abroad experience, regardless of length, increased the number of students participating in study abroad programs before COVID-19. At the same time, the number of pre-service teachers wishing to undertake short-term study abroad programs is limited due to the way teacher certification requirements are put together, which include not only teaching practice but also days set aside for volunteer and special needs sessions in addition to extensive coursework [14, 15]. Accordingly, an online study abroad option lowers the barrier for students with limited time, as they do not have to travel [15].

Due to border closures during the COVID-19 (from March 2020), the majority of outbound study abroad programs in Japan were suspended. Once travel restrictions were partially lifted, participation in online programs increased throughout 2021, these programs were popular for many students in Japan as they charged lower fees, and the time difference was negligible [16]. Research on ONIC-SAPs in Japan has mainly highlighted the advantages of ONIC-SAPs. Klassen [17] discusses how the online experience of studying abroad can be beneficial to Japanese students who feel that they have been able to make progress in their language skills. Similarly, Yoshikubo et al. [18] use a quantitative and survey-based approach and conclude that students consider online study abroad a good tool for language acquisition, although the authors also hold the view that there are many pedagogical issues to overcome for an online study abroad program to be deemed successful. Moreover, some research suggests that a longing for a country not yet seen and people not yet met in person is a motivator for students to continue their studies [19]. Another benefit commonly mentioned by researchers in relation to ONIC-SAPs is safety. Students do not need to travel but stay home, and as a result, the risk of security issues is reduced [19]. Lastly, research findings to date consistently point towards reduced costs as a major advantage of ONIC-SAPs. For this reason, in particular, online study abroad programs are likely to remain a valid option as they allow a greater number of students to expand their international learning opportunities and enhance the skills needed to succeed in an increasingly culturally diverse global society in a post-COVID-19 world [18, 19].

Taken together, the studies presented in this review support the notion that ONIC-SAPs can provide a valuable intercultural learning experience. However, study abroad research should not be limited to program participants alone; a holistic and accurate picture of online study abroad should also draw on the opinions and viewpoints of other stakeholders. Although recent research focuses on institutions' or students' experiences during the pandemic, to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has addressed and combined the perspectives of students, academic, and administrative staff on online study abroad programs in one study. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by offering broader insights into online study abroad through different viewpoints. The key research question of this study is: *What are the perspectives of the people involved in the online study abroad programs during the COVID-19 period?*

3. Methodology

3.1. The Use of a Narrative Approach in Our Research Design

The significance of using a narrative approach in study abroad research (and for that matter, language learning research in general) is now a well-established notion. The research question adopted for this study requires the researchers to listen to the participants and give them a voice to convey individual perspectives and experiences. Understanding narratives, the authors draw heavily on Bruner [20] and Clandinin and Connelly [21], where narratives are understood as stories of experience. In the experience-centered approach, narratives are the means of sense-making, that is, human beings create meaning from their experiences both individually and socially [20, 22]. Narratives are not only about people describing their experiences but also about how individuals understand those experiences and, most importantly, how they ascribe meaning to those experiences [21, 23]. We, therefore, decided to take a narrative approach since it appeared to be the best way to probe into the inner complexities of the stakeholders' experiences in this study, namely, the students, the teachers, and the administrative staff.

3.2. Research Setting

The research was conducted in the Faculty of Language and Literature at a university in Japan, which is renowned for its teacher certificate courses. Although approximately 60% of the students are enrolled in a teacher certificate course, only about 30% take up the teaching profession. In March 2020, the online study abroad program underway at the time was terminated. To enable students to have a study abroad experience despite border closures, two online study abroad programs were offered from March 2021 as temporary substitutes. These two programs are the focus of this study and are labeled Program A (PA) and Program B (PB) for ease of reference (Refer to Table 1). The institution in charge of PA already provided online programs before COVID-19, but students from the university had not enrolled in them previously. PB is the online replacement of the existing study abroad programs that ran only in March 2021.

Table 1. Overview of Program A and Program B

	Program A (PA)	Program B (PB)
Affiliation	Global language school	Language program of a university in Canada
Duration	3 weeks	6 weeks
Tuition for 2021(ONIC-SAP)	US$ 445	US$1,800
Tuition for 2020 (IC-SAP)	US$ 3,000	US$7,000
Lesson hours	Mondays-Fridays 2.25 hours (Students can choose the lessons: 9:00-, 13:00-, 17:00-, 21:00 JST)	Mondays-Fridays 9:00-12:00 (JST)
Number of Credits Earned	2	6
Number of Students in Class	2-10 students	8-16 students
Curriculum	• Pre-lessons (15 min): Students are given a topic of discussion for a lesson. • Lessons (45 min. x 2): • Discussion and questions about the topic. Learn new vocabulary and expressions. • Post-lessons (30 min.): • Writing or speaking assignments on the topic. Could be collaborative assignments. Students upload assignments online.	• Lessons (180 min.): Live class on Zoom • Conversation partner activity: 60 min. once a week • Appointment with a teacher: 15 min. once a week

PA is administered by a large English language school with branches in numerous locations across the world with extensive experience in providing online second language content. The program involves participation in a two-hour lesson each day for three weeks, and completion of the program provides students with two credit points for their degree course at a university in Japan. Two to ten students are placed in each group, based on the student's proficiency levels in English, and the cost of participation in the program is about US$445, including all necessary fees. In contrast, the participation fee for the equivalent In Country Study Abroad Program (IC-SAP) was approximately US$3,000 in 2020. PB is administered by a private language school run by a well-established university in Canada and offers three hours of lessons each day for six weeks. On successful completion of the program, students gain six credit points for equivalent language course credits at their home universities. Approximately five students participate in each group for these online English lessons, and the cost of participation in the program is US$1,800, including all necessary fees. In previous years, the equivalent in-country program has been offered at approximately US$7,000. The IC-SAPs were offered during the spring vacation of 2021 that is, in February and March. However, with benefits such as cost, easy accessibility, and positive student evaluations, the PA ONIC-SAP was acknowledged as a stand-alone course even after the decision was made to reinstate IC-SAPs.

3.3. Participants

Participants were selected to investigate online study abroad programs through three main perspectives: program participants, academic staff, and administrative staff. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants. All names given in this study are pseudonyms. The four students participated in the first online study abroad programs, which were organized by the university during Spring Break 2021. Only four students were interested in the program. The four students—Ken, Sho, Sara, and Yoko—are enrolled in the teacher certificate course at the home university and aim to become English language teachers. Sho, Sara, and Yoko enrolled in PA. Sho participated in the program at the end of his first year because he wanted to study abroad, even if online. Sara and Yoko joined PA at the end of their second year. Sara participated in the program to make the best use of her time because she could not go abroad, and Yoko hoped the program would help her English studies. In addition, she felt it would be easier to enroll in an online program. Only Ken participated in PB at the end of the first year of his degree course. All participants were grouped into classes at the beginning of the program according to their English skills.

Professor Brown, one of the longest-serving members of the International Exchange Committee at one of the faculties, was asked to participate in the study to add academic staff perspectives. While the committee comprises several members from different faculties, Professor Brown often accompanies students participating in study abroad programs, and she has also developed some international exchange programs in the faculty. The International Exchange Center was approached about possible participants to provide perspectives from study

abroad administration staff. Among the several staff, the Center recommended Mr. Sato as he was involved in various international projects and study abroad programs at the time.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The research analyzes the stories and experiences of participants. In particular, the paper focuses on how participants view and experience the programs. In line with a narrative approach, each story is told and interpreted using original quotes from the participants, with the researchers seeking contextual details from the data that link the stories to online study programs. All interviews were conducted in Japanese, the first language of all participants, except for that with Professor Brown. The audio data were subsequently transcribed and translated into English by the researchers for publication purposes.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using the qualitative analytic software package NVivo 12 and by researcher scrutiny and coding; that is, interpretive labels were assigned to concepts, constructs, ideas, and themes as modeled in Saldaña [24]. A coding matrix to systematically categorize data and interview transcripts was developed by the researchers, and multiple examples and patterns were used to interpret the meaning and explore possible links between categories. In particular, individual differences in the way the students engaged with the ONIC-SAPs and diverse perspectives among the three stakeholders were explored. Three recurrent categories within the parameter of the research question emerged from the coding process:

a) The overall ONIC-SAP experience
b) Advantages and disadvantages of ONIC-SAPs
c) Expectations and goals of IC-SAPs and ONIC-SAPs

Generalizations were identified among the three recurrent categories, which led to the discussion of the reconceptualization of IC-SAPs and ONIC-SAPs.

4. Findings

4.1. Advantages of Online Study Abroad Programs through the Students' Perspectives

The analysis of the students' interview data revealed several advantages of online study abroad programs. First, the students identified cost as a benefit of online programs. For example, Ken felt the online program was more affordable than the equivalent onsite program, stating "The advantage of the online program is its reasonable cost". Sho also mentioned that one of the reasons he chose Program A over Program B was that the tuition of Program A was more reasonable. Lower costs and financial support could give a larger number of students the chance to participate in either IC-SAPs or ONIC-SAPs.

When asked to recall online interaction with teachers and other students, all the students expressed the opinion that participation in ONIC-SAPs had increased their motivation and desire to join an IC-SAP: that is, they became more motivated to "go abroad" to study. When Yoko decided to participate in the ONIC-SAP, she had not considered an IC-SAP option, yet after her participation, her view of studying onsite changed: "When I decided to participate in the program, I was not thinking of studying abroad very much, but after my experience, I now feel that I really want to study abroad." For Sara, participation in the online program resulted in an even stronger desire to study abroad, "I was able to communicate with classmates from different backgrounds and the teachers were wonderful. Participation in the three-week online program was very beneficial, so I really want to study not through the computer but onsite." One of the reasons Sho participated in the program was that it offered a means of preparing for an onsite study abroad program. He became more motivated after the program as he realized the limitations of ONIC-SAPs, stating, "I was able to experience the English lessons that I could not experience in Japan. But I also want to go sightseeing as well." Expanding online interactions was a catalyst for Ken to participate in IC-SAPs in the future. He expressed the difficulty of studying overseas during his undergraduate years: "It might actually be difficult to go abroad, as I will start enrolling in the teacher certificate course from my second year." However, he continued to show a strong desire to study overseas. "The teachers sent me an email to contact them if I go to where the teacher lives. I want to meet them in person. Also, I want to experience living in a different culture." Thus, overall ONIC-SAP participation was evaluated favorably. Moreover, the programs were identified as a "taster experience" by the students, leading to students being motivated to consider IC-SAPs in the future as they realized that they were not able to experience full cultural immersion in the host country through the ONIC-SAP

In terms of increased willingness to communicate with English instructors, the findings show positive responses. All student participants are interested in becoming English language teachers, thus they also want to learn about ways of teaching English. In this regard, all four students evaluated their experiences highly. The students commented that the instructors created an atmosphere in which the students felt free to make mistakes, which led to them being more comfortable speaking in English. Sho described this in the following way:

> In the program, even when we made mistakes, they were not highlighted as what needed to be avoided. I felt it is important to create an environment where students feel comfortable making mistakes, which leads to an environment where students feel comfortable talking.

Yoko also indicated that the instructors were always positive:

It was really clear to us that the teachers were not critical of students' mistakes. I felt that the instructors did not have the notion of negating students' responses. They never said, "That's wrong, isn't it?" It was more like "Oh, that's interesting."

Sara's comments echoed Yoko's descriptions in terms of how the lecturers responded to and followed up on students' responses:

The teachers were never critical of students' responses or comments. They would attentively listen to students and give comments such as, "That's interesting." The teachers gave positive comments to each student's utterances, so, I felt the comfort of being able to say anything. It was like the teachers would pick up and follow up on what we said.

Ken's comments similarly resonated with those of the other students in terms of how the instructors regarded making mistakes in lessons: "What the teachers were telling us in every lesson was 'Do not be afraid of making mistakes.' They told us that we can learn through making mistakes." This seems to contrast with education in Japan, as students seemed to be generally worried about making mistakes in their usual lectures. Sara commented on this difference:

I feel some type of pressure in the lessons at university. I wonder if it is because we are taking lessons in a larger group in the same physical setting. (In the online lessons,) I am talking to the monitor in my room, so I might feel more comfortable. When the number of students is larger, I feel like I should not say something that is off the point.

According to the participants, lecturers also made supportive follow-up comments when students spoke up in class, which made them feel more comfortable. Yoko shared an example of a lesson in which a lecturer responded to her comment in a non-threatening manner. The lesson topic was mountains around the world, and Yoko was given a picture of the mountain and asked which mountain it was. She did not know the name of the mountain, and as she was nervous, she said, "*Mount Fuji.*" It was not Mount Fuji, but the teacher laughed, saying, "A great response!" treating her "mistake" almost as a deliberate joke. All the students in the lecture thought it was funny, and Yoko mentioned that she did not feel uncomfortable, even though she actually made a mistake.

Time efficiency was another benefit of ONIC-SAPs, particularly for the students, who were enrolled in teacher certificate courses and had limited time to travel abroad. Yoko remarked, "I feel rather insecure being an English language teacher. I wonder if it is OK to teach English without having the experience of going abroad." Being a student at the height of COVID-19, Yoko did not really have an opportunity to study abroad in her undergraduate years. Even though the hours were limited, PA allowed her to learn and interact in English with teachers and learners outside Japan.

4.2. Advantages of ONIC-SAPs through Academic Staff Perspectives

Professor Brown has extensive experience with study abroad programs. An avid language learner, she herself has enrolled in an online language learning program offered outside Japan. She feels ONIC-SAPs should be available to students as an alternative to IC-SAPs for several reasons. The first reason relates to instruction styles:

I feel that, from students' perspectives, we should have online programs as alternatives to on-site programs. I feel it is important to experience instruction from overseas educational institutions, especially for students who aspire to be teachers. It is often said that 'Teachers teach the way they learn', so experiencing lessons in different styles is quite important. They can also learn the language.

As many students in the department are enrolled in a teacher certificate course, Professor Brown emphasized the importance of participating in lessons that are taught in different teaching styles from what the students are accustomed to, stating that exposure to different styles of teaching is of crucial importance for pre-service teachers.

In addition, Professor Brown noted the benefit of learning through participation in ONIC-SAPs: "I think the students can learn the language from participation. As I said, I myself am learning a foreign language online." In fact, Professor Brown could not find a suitable program in Japan, so she has been taking online lessons offered outside Japan for two hours a week. Professor Brown believes that these lessons are quite effective. Professor Brown also commented on the reasonable cost of ONIC-SAPs, especially as the recent US dollar and Yen exchange rate has added to the actual cost of programs, stating that "If the Japanese Yen depreciation continues, I feel the ONIC-SAPs will remain as alternatives," further elaborating that "due to financial reasons, it has become difficult to encourage students to study onsite." She also highlighted the lower risk associated with ONIC-SAPs compared to IC-SAPs. Students participating in IC-SAPs are required to sign a contract acknowledging the health risks and agreeing to join a study abroad insurance scheme. This process makes students associate IC-SAPs with a high level of risk, and they are sometimes reluctant to study abroad. In contrast, ONIC-SAPs, which allow students to study from home, do not pose such risks.

Although Professor Brown questioned whether ONIC-SAPs should be acknowledged as a part of the regular curriculum post-COVID-19, she strongly argued that these online options should not be called "study abroad programs." She subsequently gave details of the various encounters participants can have during IC-SAPs, stating that a major distinction between in-country and online programs is not so much the classes but what happens during non-class time. Online programs cannot offer those experiences. Thus, academic staff like Professor Brown appear to grapple with the issue of what exactly study

abroad programs should entail. This point will be elaborated on in the disadvantages of ONIC-SAPs section.

4.3. Advantages of ONIC-SAPs through Administrative Staff Perspectives

In line with the other participants, Mr. Sato also pointed out several advantages of ONIC-SAPs. The first point Mr. Sato mentioned is accessibility, stating "I have the impression that ONIC-SAPs offer easier accessibility, which is different from going onsite. Students can receive lessons when they want to, in a place where they want to." He added that ONIC-SAPs extend participation opportunities to a larger number of students as "There are students who wish to study onsite, but they cannot do so due to some health issues or financial issues." In terms of advantages for the program administration, he referred to the absence of challenges often associated with sending students abroad:

> As for the advantages, I believe that ensuring student safety and crisis management is one of the major responsibilities of the International Exchange Center. At our university, when students go abroad without faculty chaperonage, it is essential to establish an agreement with the partner institution, whether in the form of a memorandum or other formal documentation. Although we rely on faculty members for the preparation and the making contact with the partner institution, it does sometimes feel like a considerable effort for us as well. In contrast, with online study programs, students can participate from within Japan, which removes the need for crisis management and safety measures associated with travel. This significantly reduces the preparation required to run the program, making it a major advantage.

From an administrative viewpoint, ONIC-SAP risk management is much easier than for equivalent onsite programs. In addition, face-to-face orientations for risk management before program participation are not necessary and thus not provided, and students from different campuses can easily participate in the programs.

4.4. Disadvantages of ONIC-SAPs through Student Perspectives

The responses regarding the disadvantage of ONIC-SAPs focused on the fact that the students could not travel and study abroad in situ and were required to attend lectures online. Yoko, Ken, and Sara all expressed frustration with various temporal and physical limitations. Yoko noted, "It was not enough for me. We would be studying, such as working on an exercise or reading something, but the lesson had to end. I wish I had more time to study. The lessons were too short."

Sara also mentioned time limitations due to the program being online:

> If I were there, I would have been able to experience (be exposed to) the English language 24 hours a day.

Everything would be in English. But, the online study is limited to only two hours a day. I can only be exposed to English for two hours a day. And the program was only for three weeks, which is quite short. I wish I had had more time. Also, it would be nice to study in a different country. The biggest disadvantage is that we cannot go there.

Ken had similar thoughts to Yoko and Sara. He noted: The biggest disadvantage was that once I shut down the computer, I was no longer exposed to English. My exposure to English was limited to a few hours a day. There were activities such as conversation groups, but once I shut down the computer, I was only surrounded by Japanese. If I am on site, even outside of the lessons, I might be able to hear people talking in English on the street. I would hear English when I turn on the TV. I would be able to be exposed to English, but I cannot do that through the online program. The teacher showed us the city using Google Earth, but we cannot experience the city.

Sho highlighted the challenges of communicating with others online by explaining, "As we were not meeting others face-to-face, it was difficult to talk and interact with others. It is not the same as talking to others in person." He also referred to a lack of support from the program administrators in terms of available materials and space to meet other students: "The information provided by the program in terms of self-access material was not very clear. Such information should be provided more clearly."

Outside of the lessons, he found it difficult to talk to his classmates: "I have never met my classmates and there were no opportunities for me to get to know them. Creating opportunities to meet the classmates might be necessary." Actual relationships and interactions with real people outside of class are lacking across all programs conducted exclusively via digital platforms.

4.5. Disadvantages of ONIC-SAPs through Academic Staff Perspectives

Professor Brown's comment that online programs should not be called or regarded as "study abroad programs" underscores that a vital part of IC-SAPs is difficult to duplicate in ONIC-SAPs. She feels that an important aspect of studying abroad is to look at one's customs and norms from different perspectives and to learn and observe firsthand that knowledge of what is accepted and familiar in the home country may not be applicable in different cultural contexts. She explained:

> When we visit someone's house, we think about when we should arrive there, what we should bring, how we should give it to the host, and when and how we should leave, and such, and this cannot be done online.

In addition, Professor Brown emphasized the need for university students in Japan to study abroad as they have fewer opportunities, compared to students for example in

Europe, to interact with people from different countries. The need was highlighted even more for pre-service teachers as they were likely to be their future students' connection to the English language and the world outside of Japan. Professor Brown also pointed out that visiting different countries acted as a gateway to expanding the knowledge and interests of pre-service teachers themselves. She further explained:

> One of the textbooks that I use at the university now discusses people such as Margaret Thatcher or Jimi Hendrix, but the students do not know who they are. The students do not know where Sao Paulo is. By going overseas, I want the students to meet people from different cultures and to be interested in different parts of the world.

Professor Brown suggested that going abroad could foster autonomy in Japanese students by exposing them to different expectations of the same age group in different contexts.

4.6. Disadvantages of ONIC-SAPs through Administrative Staff Perspectives

As for the disadvantages of ONIC-SAPs, Mr. Sato mentioned time differences and cost. Due to the time difference with the host institution, in this case, Canada, the number of lessons that students can take is restricted. Furthermore, he also comments that the cost of the programs is still an issue and wonders whether the online study abroad programs are worth the outlay.

> How can I put it... I remember once hearing from a student that although we think the cost of Program A of around US$450 to US$525 is low, there are online resources like YouTube or online English conversation lessons that cost only around US$100 per month or nothing. From the students' point of view, they may question whether paying a lot of money for an online program is really worth it. They are part of a generation that has free access to a wide range of content on their mobile phones, including games and information, so they aren't very used to paying for online content, or perhaps they feel a little reluctant to do so.

> Mr. Sato continued: My impression is that we're attracting a limited number of students - perhaps a third of what we expected - despite the significantly lower costs. For example, the onsite study abroad Program B costs about $7,000, and even though it is online, it still costs about $1,800. Program A, on the other hand, costs around $450 to $525. I think there should be more interest at that price point, but maybe it's not quite what students are looking for and we're still trying to figure that out.

Mr. Sato's comment underscores the fact that younger people may think of online content as something that is often available free of charge and easily accessible via YouTube videos or free English language learning applications, such as Duolingo. Mr. Sato further explained that the students who were willing to pay for ONIC-SAP were those who were interested in the content of the program and were serious about studying at university.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study is to understand and explore people who participated in ONIC-SAPs regarding the programs through the participants' rich stories about their online study abroad program experiences. This study was limited by the small number of participants. However, what we were looking for in the narratives were personal, detailed experiences of the ONIC-SAPs. With regard to ONIC-SAPs, as noted in the literature review section, much of the research suggests that there is some degree of learning satisfaction and success. This study is no exception. Both the students and the academic staff evaluated ONIC-SAPs positively in terms of language learning content. However, in terms of ONIC-SAPs' usefulness as a preparation for pre-service teachers, a variety of viewpoints surface. For instance, the students seemed to regard ONIC-SAPs as an alternative to IC-SAPs, enabling them to gain a semi-required study abroad experience during their undergraduate years as pre-service teachers. On the other hand, Professor Brown argued that ONIC-SAPs could not be an alternative to IC-SAPs for pre-service teachers and suggested the need for them to study onsite.

The main and somewhat unexpected finding of this study is that the advantages of ONIC-SAPs are also seen as the disadvantages of the programs. Or perhaps they are two sides of the same coin. Firstly, a main advantage of ONIC-SAPs for participants is the cost. On the other hand, any cost was mentioned as a disadvantage. Although there were no travel or accommodation costs, as both one of the students and the administrator pointed out, it is indeed questionable whether online study abroad programs are worth the cost. In today's world of free online learning options, such as YouTube or Duolingo, one must ask whether it is really necessary to spend a lot of money on online study programs organized by a university. Free online applications could be customized for users based on what they want to learn, how they want to learn and when they want to learn [25], but it will be questioned how flexible and customizable the university's online study abroad programs are. Digitalization accelerated by the spread of COVID-19 illustrated that online learning is not only an alternative that can be offered during times of emergency but is also a viable means of offering lectures and courses in the regular curricula. As this study did not focus on the content of the programs, it would be necessary to further investigate the curriculum and content of online study abroad programs. Programs, projects, and activities using digital platforms for exchanges or collaboration can

be explored and expanded even further to enhance cross-cultural interactions, as suggested by Liu and Shirley [5].

Secondly, ONIC-SAPs are a disadvantage in terms of time efficiency. Students' exposure to the study abroad experience is limited to class time. For some students, one of the main advantages of online programs is the opportunity to complete a program and still graduate in the minimum period of study without leaving Japan. Due to the MEXT guidelines, participation in short study abroad programs during summer or spring vacations has become quite common for university students in Japan [26] to the extent that they see participation almost as a requirement rather than a choice. However, the MEXT research indicates that the possibility of taking more than four years to graduate is high, and the cost of study abroad programs is a major issue for students [27]. Ken, who participated in the program at the end of his first year, expressed an ongoing interest in participating in IC-SAPs during his time at university but said that it would be difficult for him to go abroad after his enrollment in the teacher certificate course in his second year, which indicates that timing is important for students.

Finally, safety is obviously an advantage of ONIC-SAPs. For example, one of the students expressed that she was worried that her lack of experience in studying abroad would be a disadvantage in her pursuit of a career as an English language teacher. ONIC-SAPs that offer opportunities for students enrolled in teacher certificate courses to "study abroad" programs help fill this gap. However, while online study abroad offers safety, it does not offer the chance for 'real world' experiences. Although it is difficult to replace on-site study abroad programs with ONIC-SAPs, the educational experience could be enhanced in students' learning [28]. Professor Brown also stressed the need for pre-service teachers to study onsite. She strongly argued the need for an in-country stay, especially for students in Japan as they do not have ample opportunities to meet people from other countries in everyday life. Her argument resonated with the benefits of IC-SAPs pointed out in the literature, such as gaining cultural knowledge [29], increased intercultural and global awareness [30], a better understanding of diversity, and positive changes in their perspectives, values, and academic outcomes [31, 32]. Thus, she maintained that pre-service teachers must go abroad and be exposed to different ways of doing things and interact with others from different sociocultural contexts. In terms of the drawbacks of the online programs, the views of the students and the academic staff match; both see online learning as devoid of the experience of living in an environment with a different linguistic and cultural background, concurring with observations made by Tong et al. [11]. Interaction with other students on the same ONIC-SAPs ceases the minute computers are turned off, and students continue their everyday lives in their home country and do not have any further opportunities to gain linguistic or intercultural skills. The participants expressed a desire to visit different places,

try different types of food, and interact with people face-to-face rather than by using a monitor. Learning languages is not just a linguistic process but a social endeavor that involves connecting various life learning experiences. However, the question is how these 'real-life experience elements' could be covered in ONIC-SAPs. With the development of digitalization and ICT, it is expected that the development of ONIC-SAPs will be exploited [19].

6. Conclusions

The study was designed to examine stakeholder perspectives of ONIC-SAPs conducted during the pandemic. Analysis of the participants' experiences and viewpoints has shown that the advantages of online study abroad programs can also be seen as disadvantages. Taken together, these results highlight the need for further research into the content and curriculum of online study abroad programs to find ways to improve the value of online learning in the future. In the post-COVID era, online study abroad programs have remained an option, allowing more pre-service English language teachers in Japan to expand their international learning opportunities and thereby improve their intercultural communication skills and English language proficiency.

This study's findings have several implications for IC-SAPs and ONIC-SAPs. First, consideration of the place of ONIC-SAPs, especially, in the post-COVID era, is required. A re-evaluation of the content provided by IC-SAPs is necessary to ascertain whether this content meets the needs of participants. In general, IC-SAPs and ONIC-SAPs are distinguished by the unstated requirement for the former to provide a holistic experience - that is, a rich immersion in the culture of the host country. If the content objectives can be achieved through online programs, then ONIC-SAPs could become a preferred study option. Second, the extent to which IC-SAPs are affordable and accessible should be given greater attention. Opportunities for study abroad and intercultural encounters should not be exclusive. Lastly, a reassessment of online teaching methods may be required. The pandemic offered educators and institutions valuable experience and knowledge about online teaching, which could be applied to further improve online program content. This research has raised a number of issues regarding the implementation and nature of ONIC-SAPs while these programs are certainly more environmentally friendly and financially advantageous.

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