

***Exploring Undergraduate Attitudes Toward Study Abroad:
Insights From a Cross-Sectional Study***

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study conducted in 2023 explores the attitudes of 94 undergraduate students in Vietnam toward studying abroad. The investigation focuses on the perceived importance of studying abroad, particularly in Japan, and the preferences guiding the selection of study abroad destinations. Utilizing a five-level Likert scale, the questionnaire measured participants' attitudes, revealing that 6.4% had undergone short-term study experiences in Japan, and 12.8% expressed plans for post-graduation study abroad. The results underscore participants' perceptions of the importance of study abroad for developing communication skills (Mean [M]=4.52) and cross-cultural competency (M=4.39), rather than prospect of higher income. Concerning preferred study abroad locations, participants favored areas with potential long-term job opportunities (M=4.09) and beautiful, clean environments (M=4.03). Factors such as part-time job availability, local festivals, and a low cost of living in suburban areas were also identified as significant. Notably, respondents believed that foreign degrees are popular in their home country (M=3.71), while not perceiving home country education as lacking choices (M=2.49). The participants prioritized financial support, cultural experiences, and practical assistance when choosing a study abroad institution. These findings provide insights into undergraduate attitudes toward studying abroad, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to address the needs for studying abroad.

Keywords: Attitude, Japanese Language Proficiency, Cross-Cultural Competency, Study Abroad Preferences

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Introduction

The globalization of education has increasingly highlighted the significance of studying abroad as a pivotal element of higher education (Altbach et al., 2019; Salisbury et al., 2009). This trend is particularly evident in developing countries, where students often seek international experiences to enhance their academic and professional prospects (Abbott & Silles, 2016). Vietnam, with its rapidly expanding economy and growing emphasis on educational attainment, is no exception. The allure of studying abroad, especially in countries renowned for their educational excellence, presents Vietnamese students with opportunities to acquire new skills, gain cultural insights, and enhance their employability in a competitive global market (Tran et al., 2024; Tran & Jin, 2021).

Japan has emerged as a popular destination for Vietnamese students due to its reputation for academic rigor, advanced technological environment, and rich cultural heritage (Tran & Jin, 2022b, 2022a). Despite the growing interest, there is limited empirical research focusing on undergraduates' attitudes toward studying abroad, particularly in Japan. Understanding these attitudes is crucial for educators, policymakers, and institutions aiming to support and guide students in their international educational pursuits.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework proposed by the authors based on literature and previous research. Short-term study abroad during college is reported to contribute to changing multicultural attitude (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). Students chosen long-term study abroad for a graduate degree tend to find work abroad (Baruch et al., 2007).

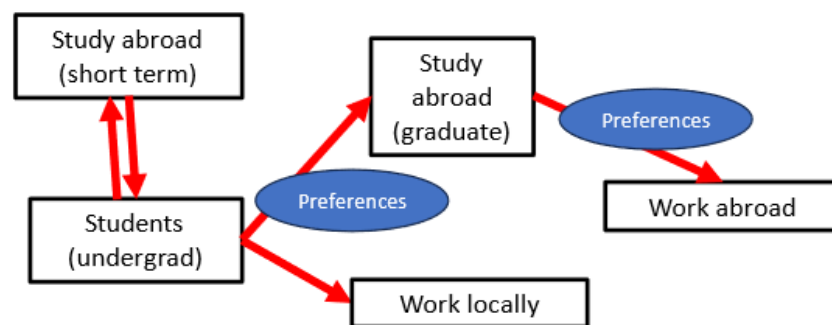


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (by the authors)

The primary objectives of this study are to assess the attitudes of Vietnamese undergraduate students toward studying abroad and to identify the specific factors influencing their choice of study abroad destinations, with a particular emphasis on Japan. Additionally, the study aims to evaluate the perceived benefits of studying abroad, particularly in terms of skill development, cultural competency, and career prospects. It also seeks to understand the preferences and priorities of students when selecting study abroad institutions. By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide an understanding of the motivations and considerations that shape Vietnamese students' decisions to pursue education abroad.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional research design. The target population consisted of undergraduate students in Vietnam. Data was collected in the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year through a web-survey questionnaire. The web-survey questionnaire was structured to obtain information in several key areas: (a) Demographic information: age,

gender, academic year, etc.; (b) Attitudes towards study and work abroad: general attitudes towards studying and working abroad, including desired duration of staying abroad; (c) Preferred destination attributes. The questionnaire used five-level Likert-style questions from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Participants were provided with information about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The study was approved by the IRB of the Graduate School of Science and Technology, Tokushima University (No. 20008).

Results

All participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a university in Vietnam, majoring in Japanese studies. The data in Table 1 provides a comprehensive profile of the participants. The majority of participants are female (88.3%) with a mean age of 22.2 years, and most are single (91.5%). In terms of living arrangements, a significant number live in rental accommodations (46.8%), with nearly half co-living with roommates (50.0%). Academically, the predominant sub-major is Business Japanese (56.4%), and most students are in their third year (75.5%), with English proficiency generally at a basic level (70.2%). Family background data shows that the majority of students' parents have a high school education (68.1%), and 72.3% of students report no family members with study abroad experience. Socioeconomically, the perceived family income is predominantly average (80.9%), with a small minority indicating high income (1.1%). These data highlight a predominantly female, young, and single student body, mostly from average-income families with limited exposure to study abroad through family members.

Table 1: Characteristics (N=94)

Variable	Value	Total	
		<i>n</i>	%
Age	M = 22.2; SD = 3.2; Median=21.0		
Gender	Female	83	88.3
	Male	11	11.7
Marital status	Single	86	91.5
	Married	8	8.5
Lodging	Dormitory	16	17.0
	Rental	44	46.8
	Home	34	36.2
Co-living with	Alone	8	8.5
	Roommate	47	50.0
	Family	39	41.5
Sub-major	Business Japanese	53	56.4
	Translation/Interpretation	21	22.3
	Japanese teaching	20	21.3
Grade	1st year	0	0
	2nd year	0	0
	3rd year	71	75.5
	4th year	23	24.5

Years studying Japanese	1 years and less	0	0
	2 years	11	11.7
	3 years	57	60.6
	4 years	13	13.8
	5 years	7	7.4
	6 years and more	6	6.4
Parents' highest education level	High school	64	68.1
	College	26	27.7
	Graduate degree	4	4.3
Study abroad experience of family members	None	68	72.3
	Other than Japan	12	12.8
	Japan	14	14.9
Hometown	Other	21	22.3
	Provincial city	35	37.2
	Metropolitan	38	40.4
Perceived family income	Low	17	18.1
	Average	76	80.9
	High	1	1.1

Figure 2 shows the percentage of participants who have had study abroad experiences. Particularly, there were 6 students (6.4%) have had a study abroad experience in Japan. This data shows that the majority of students have not studied abroad, only a small proportion of students have experience studying in Japan.

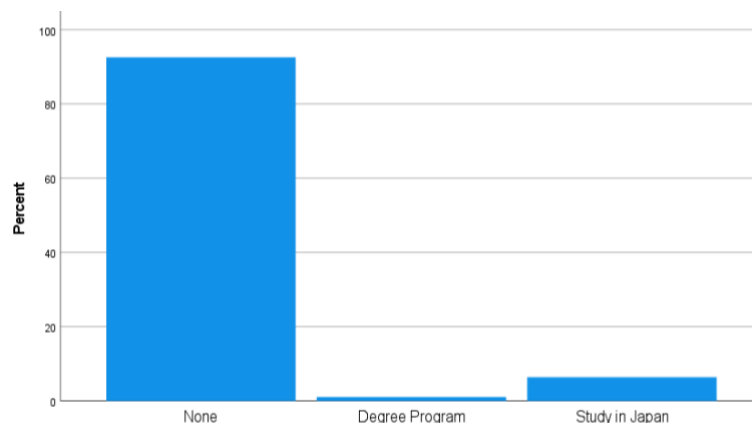


Figure 2: Study Abroad Experience (N=94)

Figure 3 presents the percentage of participants who have specific plans for their future, among which get a job (75.5%), study abroad (12.8%), and not decided (11.7%). This data indicates that a small portion are looking to continue their education overseas.

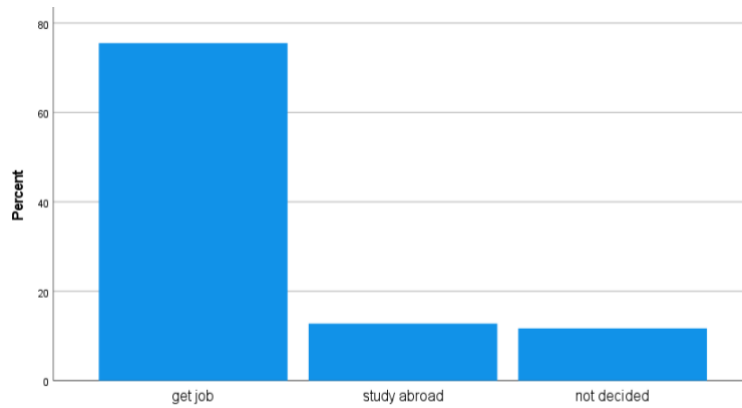


Figure 3: Future Study Abroad Plan (N=94)

The data presented in Table 2 reflects participants' perceptions of the importance of studying abroad for various aspects of their development and future prospects. Students generally perceive study abroad as highly important for developing communication skills, cross-cultural competency, and personal development. It is seen as moderately important for future income and career prospects, with somewhat more varied opinions.

Table 2: Perceived Importance of Study Abroad

Important for	Mean	Median	SD
Communication skills	4.52	5.00	.562
Cross-cultural competency	4.39	4.00	.610
Personal development	4.33	4.00	.629
Future income	3.65	4.00	.851
Future career	3.56	3.00	.837

Table 3 explores the factors associated with attitudes about the importance of studying abroad and plan for pursuing a graduate degree abroad. Notably, a significant correlation was found between Japanese levels and the perceived importance of studying abroad ($r = 0.226$, $p = 0.029$). Additionally, parents' education level showed a significant positive correlation with the importance placed on studying abroad ($r = 0.240$, $p = 0.020$). Other variables, such as English proficiency, years studied Japanese, study abroad experience, age, sex, sub-major, grade, marital status, dormitory status, co-living status, hometown, family's study abroad experience, and family income, did not show significant correlations with either the importance of studying abroad or study abroad plans.

Table 3: Factors Associated With Attitude Towards Study Abroad

		Importance Study Abroad	Study abroad plan
Japanese level (JLPT)	r	.226*	.035
	p	.029	.740
English level	r	.013	-.046
	p	.897	.657
Years studied Japanese	r	-.016	-.069
	p	.881	.509
Study abroad experience	r	.168	.006
	p	.106	.951
Age	r	.014	-.069
	p	.891	.508
Sex	r	.023	-.139
	p	.828	.181
Sub-major	r	-.165	-.122
	p	.112	.243
Grade	r	-.103	.005
	p	.321	.964
Marital status	r	-.067	.002
	p	.519	.981
Dormitory status	r	.040	-.027
	p	.700	.797
Co-living status	r	.029	.002
	p	.778	.985
Parents' education	r	.240*	.025
	p	.020	.814
Hometown	r	-.076	-.112
	p	.467	.282
Family's study abroad experience	r	-.202	-.091
	p	.051	.383
Family income	r	-.137	-.005
	p	.189	.961

* $p < 0.05$, r: Spearman's correlation coefficient.

In Table 4, participants perceived a bias towards foreign degrees and have moderate concerns about immigration opportunities, research capabilities, and part-time job availability. There were also some issues with the number of university seats, the difficulty of entrance exams, the range of study fields, and the quality of universities.

Table 4: Attitude Towards Domestic Education

	Mean	Median	SD
Foreign degrees are preferred	3.71	4.00	.832
Low possibility of immigration	3.10	3.00	.868
Research capabilities are low	2.85	3.00	.816
Few part-time job opportunities	2.84	3.00	.919
Not enough university seats	2.82	3.00	.775
Easy to fail entrance exams	2.55	2.50	.825
Short of fields that I want to study	2.49	2.00	.813
Quality of universities is not high	2.45	2.00	.697
Instability	2.41	2.00	.966

According to Table 5, participants placed the highest value on the clean environment, the recognition of Japanese degrees, and the high quality of education in Japan. Interest in

Japanese culture and the availability of part-time jobs were also significant factors. While practical considerations like simplicity of admission and visa procedures were positively viewed, they were less critical compared to other aspects like employment prospects, lifestyle, and safety.

Table 5: Attitude Towards Japan's Education

	Mean	Median	SD
Clean environment	4.34	4	0.632
Japanese degrees are valued	4.12	4	0.620
High quality education	4.06	4	0.601
Interested in Japan culture, nature, language	3.71	4	0.850
Plenty of part-time jobs	3.62	4	0.735
prospects for employment and stay in Japan	3.53	4	0.772
I love the Japanese lifestyle	3.26	3	1.047
Near my country	3.21	3	0.853
Japan is stable and safe.	3.2	3	0.968
Tuition cheaper than English countries	3.13	3	0.845
Admission is simple	2.9	3	0.588
Visa procedure is simple	2.86	3	0.712

According to Table 6, participants prioritized financial aid, cultural events, affordability, international exchange, job support, language classes, and counseling services when selecting a university. While academic prestige and accolades were considered, they were less critical than practical support and opportunities for personal and professional development.

Table 6: Preferences for a University

	Mean	Median	SD
Have scholarship	4.29	4	0.633
Have Japanese culture event	4.28	4	0.678
Have tuition exemption	4.24	4	0.758
Exchange with foreign students	4.19	4	0.627
Job hunting support	4.14	4	0.697
Japanese class	4.13	4	0.722
Counseling	4.12	4	0.716
Exchange with Japanese students	4.12	4	0.760
Modern facility	4.09	4	0.599
Disaster preventions	4.05	4	0.709
High employment rate	3.99	4	0.823
Dormitory	3.96	4	0.828
Have desired programs	3.95	4	0.753
Have student clubs	3.77	4	0.897
High-ranking	3.70	4	0.716
English environment	3.67	4	0.847
National university	3.51	3	0.813
EMI program	3.47	4	0.851
Have Nobel winner	2.91	3	0.825

In Table 7, participants prioritized practical aspects like job opportunities and cultural aspects such as landscape and festivals when choosing a study abroad location. They also considered factors like city size and the presence of social connections, while countryside locations were less favored. These preferences reflect a blend of academic, cultural, and practical considerations in selecting a study abroad destination.

Table 7: Preferences for Locality

	Mean	Median	SD
Get employment easy	4.09	4	0.676
Beautiful landscape	4.03	4	0.613
Festivals	3.97	4	0.695
Part-time jobs	3.96	4	0.638
Small city	3.70	4	0.787
Tourism place	3.68	4	0.806
Have relatives or friends	3.45	3.5	1.001
Have compatriots	3.41	3	1.062
Countryside	3.33	3	0.872

Figure 4 indicates that in case of study abroad, students would primarily rely on part-time jobs for financial support. Parents' support would be also a significant source of funding. Scholarships and loans were moderately important. This suggests that while students may utilize a combination of these sources to fund their education abroad, they may consider part-time employment and parental assistance seem to be the most crucial.

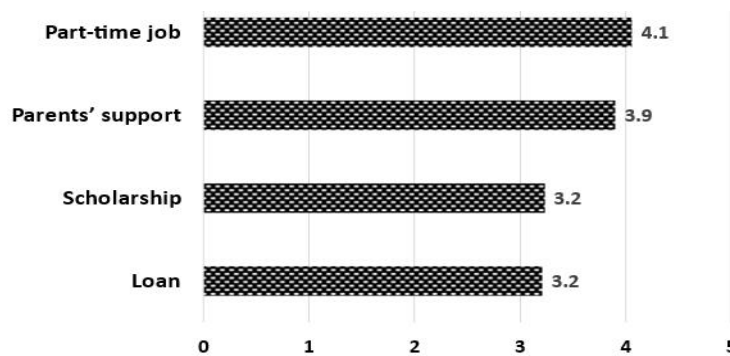


Figure 4: Future Study Abroad Plan (N=94)

Discussion

The findings of this cross-sectional study offer valuable insights into the attitudes and preferences of Vietnamese undergraduate students regarding studying abroad, with a particular focus on Japan. Participants in the study demonstrated a strong belief in the significance of studying abroad for personal and professional development. Key motivations included enhancing communication skills and cross-cultural competency, which were rated highly on the Likert scale. This aligns with global trends where students increasingly view international experiences as essential for broadening their perspectives and improving their career prospects. These findings, which are in line with previous studies (Schenker, 2019), indicate that students acknowledge the benefits of international education in improving their abilities and qualifications, thus enhancing their competitiveness in the global employment landscape.

The current study has found the influence of parents' education into the attitude towards study abroad. According to previous research, parent's education has influenced the choice and intent to study abroad (Salisbury et al., 2009) and parents reported to play an important role in study abroad decision making (Bodycott, 2009). However, in our previous investigation we have not found such a relationship (Tran, 2023a). Interestingly, the participants perceived foreign degrees as highly valued in Vietnam, indicating a recognition of the competitive advantage conferred by international education. Preference of foreign degrees also has been reported to be common in some developing countries (Ahsan-ul-haq & Dar, 2014). In contrast,

there was indication of satisfaction with the educational choices available domestically, suggesting a nuanced perspective on the perceived strengths of both local and international educational offerings.

The study identified specific students' preferences for study abroad destinations. Areas offering potential long-term job opportunities and featuring beautiful and clean environments were highly favored. Moreover, the availability of part-time jobs, local festivals, and a low cost of living in suburban areas emerged as significant considerations. These preferences reflect a blend of career aspirations, lifestyle choices, and cultural interests among the participants. This is somehow consistent with our previous results found among international students in Japan (Tran, 2023a). One notable finding is that students prioritize destinations offering natural resources and cultural festivities when selecting where to study or work abroad. This preference for comprehensive experiences suggests a desire for more than just career prospects or academic learning; students seek a well-rounded international journey that includes cultural immersion and exposure to diverse environments (Tran, 2023b). Non-metropolitan educational institutions can capitalize on this insight by customizing their marketing strategies to emphasize unique cultural experiences and job opportunities available in their locations, thereby enhancing competitiveness.

The strong preference for universities providing scholarship, tuition waivers, job hunting support and modern facilities reflects students' practical considerations. These preferences underscore the importance of robust support services that ease students' transition into international academic environments and enrich their overall educational experience. Institutions addressing these needs effectively are likely to attract more students and foster positive study abroad experiences (Inai, 2012). Other intriguing findings from this study include the relatively low percentage of respondents considering permanent relocation abroad, highlighting a tendency among Vietnamese individuals to prioritize family ties compared to other ethnic groups (Sato, 2023). Our previous work has explored how factors such as age, gender, academic year, living arrangements, and familial influences may shape attitudes and preferences towards studying abroad (Tran, 2023b; Tran et al., 2023), though these factors have not been found associated in this data set. The fact that the participants shows strong preference for universities providing scholarship, tuition waivers, job hunting support (Table 6) and strong preference for places with plenty of part-time job (Table 7) is consistent with the reliance on part-time job to finance the study. This finding support the premise that financial factors are found important for study abroad (Whatley, 2017).

This study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small, and the study's cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future research could employ longitudinal approaches or qualitative methods to further explore the evolving attitudes and experiences of students. Additionally, investigating the outcomes and experiences of students who have studied abroad, particularly in Japan, would enrich our understanding of the broader impacts of international education.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to the growing body of literature on student mobility and international education by highlighting the specific attitudes, preferences, and perceptions of Vietnamese undergraduate students towards studying abroad, particularly in Japan. By addressing these insights, stakeholders in higher education can better support and promote

meaningful study abroad experiences that align with the aspirations and goals of Vietnamese students.

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