

Students' perceptions of the impacts of short-term international courses

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine what impacts university students perceived from their short-term intensive international courses as part of undergraduate multidisciplinary education.

Design/methodology/approach – The study design was informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis. Semi-structured interviews explored informants' views of their experience to elicit key themes of their experience.

Findings – The analysis resulted in four major themes: personal development, generic skills, global perspectives and subject-specific matter. Some text segments were coded with multiple themes, which suggests that the impacts of short-term international courses are multifaceted.

Research limitations/implications – Academic topics of the courses substantially centred around humanities and social sciences at a particular university. This paper furthermore primarily depended on students' self-reported answers, and it is possible that the participants who chose to enrol in the elective international courses may be principally willing to acquire global competence. Therefore, this study did not set out to present the generalised impacts of any short-term international courses.

Practical implications – The findings could be used as a conceptual tool for the design and evaluation of new and existing courses. In addition, the four major themes that this study elicited are useful as a cue for students' self-reflection about their own learning experiences.

Originality/value – There have been significant efforts devoted to increasing the quantity of short-term international programs, but there has been less focus on the quality of these programs. This study supports the findings of existing literature but also identified one of the potential unfavourable impacts that short-term international courses may have on students' development.

Keywords Study abroad, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, International education, Educational impact, Short-term international course

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globalisation is deeply ingrained in modern higher education (Boateng and Thompson, 2013). Nurturing students' knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable them to work in unfamiliar global settings is of significant concern in contemporary society (Boateng and Thompson, 2013; Guyer, 2011). This trend has induced universities to promote international activities and pedagogy, and among them are short-term international courses, in which students engage in global and cross-cultural intensive learning experiences for a fairly short while (one week to several weeks, usually shorter than a semester or quarter). The increase in participants is apparent in certain countries such as the USA, Australia and Europe (e.g. Campbell, 2016; Hall *et al.*, 2016; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018). It is also clear in Japan, where more than half of university students who studied abroad participated in credit-bearing



programs for less than one month (Kim *et al.*, 2012). Such courses can be taken through international peer communities overseas and domestically.

Universities nowadays are subject to the pressure of educational accountability (Michavila and Martinez, 2018), which requires short-term international courses to comply with related policies (Landon *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, most of the efforts have focused on increasing the quantity rather than the quality of international programs (Tarrant and Lyons, 2012). Short-term international pedagogy lags behind general demand for educational accountability despite its significant share of educational practitioners' attention (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Ferrari and Fine, 2016; Guyer, 2011; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018; Landon *et al.*, 2017). Even without rendering the accountability to third parties, it is a pressing concern for course leaders to understand how participants perceived their experiences and the impacts of what is still a temporarily and financially demanding pedagogy (Jones *et al.*, 2012; Tucker *et al.*, 2011). Understanding students' experiences beyond the typical vague statements such as good memories, new experiences or unforgettable moments is highly valuable for future course development (Hall *et al.*, 2016). Course design certainly affects students' development (Landon *et al.*, 2017; Tucker *et al.*, 2011).

The shortage of research on the high-quality pedagogy of short-term international courses motivated this study. Drawing upon students' reflective episodes about their learning experiences, this study explores their perceptions of the impacts of short-term international courses as part of the university liberal arts curriculum in Japan. The study presents key themes and descriptions provided by those who participated in geographically and academically different short-term international courses.

Study abroad and short-term international courses

Commonly, study abroad is recognised as a high-impact practice for university students' greater academic engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). High-impact practices are students' academic experiences which are significantly influential in their personal and academic development. These experiences often require students' substantial effort, involvement in diverse learning environments, out-of-class learning, collaborative activities and abundant feedback from peers and instructors (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). The literature often demonstrates that students who study abroad develop greater cultural understanding, sensitivity, adaptability and awareness of global issues (e.g. Miller-Perrin and Thompson, 2014; Sutton and Rubin, 2004; Williams, 2005). Development of communicative skills and linguistic knowledge is also among the major outcomes (Miller-Perrin and Thompson, 2014). There is also evidence that those who studied abroad achieved more academically than those who did not (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). Furthermore, students often report that they have experienced significant personal growth in areas such as self-awareness, flexibility, creativity and confidence (Miller-Perrin and Thompson, 2014; Potts, 2015), as well as reconsideration of their own study focus, career prospects and life course, as a result of their study abroad experiences (Dwyer, 2004; Miller-Perrin and Thompson, 2014).

Accordingly, traditional year/semester-long study abroad offers rich and broad global learning experiences for students. However, it is not an option for some students, for example, those who cannot afford the costs of a full-year sojourn (Walters *et al.*, 2016), those enrolled in strictly structured degree programs with a more limited credit transfer system (Donnelly-Smith, 2009) and those who are not yet confident about studying abroad on their own (Tarrant and Lyons, 2012).

In contrast, short-term international courses occasionally receive unjustified resistance since semester- or year-long programs have long been the standard (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Some students even see short-term study abroad courses as a vacation and or easy way to quickly earn credits (Davies, 2006; Koernig, 2007; Rahikainen and Hakkarainen, 2013).

One typical pedagogical drawback, owing to the short nature of a course, is difficulty for students to reach deep understanding of, and profound attitudinal modification towards, subject matter (Davies, 2006). However, short-term international programs appeal to those who have no previous overseas experience, cannot participate in longer programs or need a springboard for future longer overseas experiences (Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Hovde, 2002; Tarrant and Lyons, 2012).

The impacts of short-term international courses include improving students' understanding of multicultural societies, home country conditions and functional knowledge of discipline-specific matter (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Deans, 2011; Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Hovde, 2002; Jackson, 2006; McLaughlin and Johnson, 2006; Weaver and Tucker, 2010). Some students even reconsider their major field because of contact with new fields (Lewis *et al.*, 2005). In addition to their enhanced knowledge base, students may improve skill sets such as applying scientific knowledge, communicating effectively orally and in writing with others, conducting field research and working with others (Boateng and Thompson, 2013; McLaughlin and Johnson, 2006). Students have also reported personal development in areas including self-confidence in living abroad, self-understanding and tolerance (Boateng and Thompson, 2013; Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Hall *et al.*, 2016; Jackson, 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Weaver and Tucker, 2010; Wilson *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, short-term study abroad experiences can help participants develop new networks with students overseas as well as with students from the same campus, which includes students they would otherwise not reach within their former social networks (Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Weaver and Tucker, 2010). Participants also often attain new perspectives for future study ambitions and career paths (Deans, 2011; Dolby, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Weaver and Tucker, 2010; Wilson *et al.*, 2016).

Researchers have argued about the impacts of different international programme lengths on students. For example, Dwyer (2004) found a consistent perception of greater attainment in academic, career goal, personal and intercultural development among those who studied abroad for a full year compared to those in six- or seven-week summer programs. Kehl and Morris (2008) also demonstrated that global-mindedness was significantly greater for participants of semester-long rather than short-term programs (eight weeks or less).

However, some researchers have also acknowledged the values of shorter-term international programs. Dwyer (2004) noted that summer programme participants seemed to achieve learning outcomes comparable to those in semester-long programs. The length of overseas study experience made no significant difference in students' use of deep approaches to learning (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). Referring to Dwyer (2004), Campbell (2016) also agreed that the students enjoyed a remarkable positive impact on personal growth from short international summer course experiences. Campbell (2016) continued, noting that short-term students may proactively involve themselves in their studies at their home campus after sojourning and become focused on their studies. Students in well-structured international courses can engage in experiences that are just as valuable as those provided by on-campus courses or even more so, regardless of the duration (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Hall *et al.*, 2016; Landon *et al.*, 2017; McLaughlin and Johnson, 2006; Olson and Lalley, 2012; Weaver and Tucker, 2010).

While short-term international courses have grown in popularity as a novel pedagogical medium, empirical evidence of students' learning experiences is limited to date. There is a particular lack of research regarding the impacts of the courses on students' development and the quality of education beyond foreign language competence and cultural understanding (Campbell, 2016; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018). In addition, most studies have addressed the experiences of students from English-speaking countries such as the USA and Australia (e.g. Gomez-Lanier, 2017; McLaughlin and Johnson, 2006; Tarrant and Lyons, 2012).

It would be valuable for researchers to further investigate the courses in terms of different destinations, contexts, disciplines and student demographics (Campbell, 2016; Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004).

Theoretical framework: experiential learning theory

Students in short-term international courses experience new and multicultural learning, and simultaneously engage in active learning opportunities beyond simply being immersed in subject matter knowledge, such as group tasks, project work, discussions, field site visits, student-centred research and study diaries. Students get directly involved in mutually influential interactions between themselves and their environment, where realities are indeed the objectives of learning (Kolb, 2014). Experiential learning theory, widely thanks to Kolb and his colleagues' seminal work (e.g. Kolb, 2014), advocates the process of learning through one's own experiences over learning from teachers, books and decontextualised drills. Experiential learning theory encourages individuals to engage in experiences and invites them to critically reflect on those experiences to build new knowledge, skills and understanding. Pedagogical practices based on the theory place primal responsibility on learners to interpret and make good use of experiences for personally meaningful learning and development (Wilson *et al.*, 2016).

Kolb's (2014) model suggests that individuals learn more effectively through the cyclical four-stage process: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Individuals' engagement in concrete activities (e.g., in short-term international courses) is followed by reflective observation, in which they reflect on their concrete experience and consider what happened, how the experience occurred and what they thought through it. Reflective observation may lead to abstract conceptualisation, in which abstract ideas, lessons and personal theories are formed by individuals incorporating knowledge, prior experiences, external information sources and insights from peers. Referring to the understanding elicited from abstract conceptualisation, students undertake active experimentation, whereby they consider future decisions, planning or predictions for the foreseeable context.

To maximise students' learning experiences in short-term courses, it is important to encourage students to deliberately reflect upon what they have experienced and learned in the course, to extract new abstract ideas and insights from their experiences and to develop personal future tactics for self-development in the limited days of their trip and remaining university study. International academic experience does not automatically lead to experiential learning (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich, 2002). It is of crucial significance for the faculty in charge to strategically design courses (Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018; Landon *et al.*, 2017) and incorporate students' critical reflections about their development as part of the course experience (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). These practices are meaningful for both pedagogical improvement and the evaluation of educational effectiveness.

The aim of the study

To address the lacuna in our knowledge base, this study set out to examine what impacts students perceived experiencing in short-term intensive international courses at several different destinations as part of an undergraduate multidisciplinary education in Japan. The study is exploratory in nature and used student narratives to qualitatively probe how students made sense of the impact of course participation.

The research design

Context

The short-term international courses were offered as part of a liberal arts programme for undergraduate students at a competitive Japanese national university.

Based on the university’s strategy of “early exposure, late specialisation”, students in the first and second years engage in a wide variety of liberal arts subjects, including both science and arts courses. Students then follow specialised programs in the third and fourth years to graduate. Most of the participants in the short-term international courses are first- and second-year students.

The philosophy of the short-term international courses is to encourage students to have global intellectual experiences and to expand their knowledge on topics from diverse perspectives. Faculty lead the courses with the help of local professors and experts such as speakers and curators, and they employ various pedagogical methods such as lectures, group work, field trips, discussions, presentations and journal writing. The courses emphasise opportunities for interacting with local people, including counterpart students.

The courses differed in terms of subject, duration and instructional language (Table I). Roughly 130 students were enrolled in the short-term international courses during the 2015–2016 academic year. In addition to key subject matters, some courses emphasised a foreign language training component (the German language and culture and Chinese language and culture courses). The students obtained credits upon successful completion of required tasks, and their achievements were graded using a pass/fail criterion. The course Mt Fuji was the only in-country international course in Japan where students from an Australian university participated. The students of counterpart institutions gained credits or certificates from their local institutions.

Eligibilities for the courses varied. Some courses required applicants to have good foreign language proficiency, such as TOEFL scores of 100 or higher or previous successful completion of particular courses. Screening interviews were carried out when applications exceeded capacity. The number of participants in each course ranged between 5 and 20 (Table I).

As a member of the university’s staff, the author received mandatory training for suitable ethical conduct for research involving humans. The research was conducted according to the institutional guidelines.

Participants

The informants in this study took at least one course during the 2015–2016 school year (Table I). The researcher invited students who expressed interest in participating in

| Country | Major theme | No. of participants year 2015/2016 | Length | Language of instruction | Informant (pseudonym) |
|--------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---|
| Australia | Cultural landscapes | 20/18 | 2 weeks | English | Ray, Haruki, Julia ^a , Nao, Karen |
| China | Chinese language and culture | 20/20 | 3 weeks | Chinese and English | Anna, Ben |
| Germany | European Union | 5/5 | 10 days | English | Emily, George |
| Germany | German language and culture | NA/14 | 2 weeks | German and English | Jay, Kei |
| Hungary | Hungarian history, culture and architecture | NA/14 | 2 weeks | English | Maria, Erika, Ken, Hanna |
| Japan | Mt Fuji | 17/11 | 2 weeks | English | Leo, Sho, Naomi, Julia ^a , Nao, Karen |
| Turkmenistan | Peace and conflict | 14/NA | 2 weeks | English | (Undisclosed) ^b |
| Kazakhstan | Peace and conflict | NA/18 | 2 weeks | English | Dan, Eugene |

Table I.
Summary of
courses and
informants’ names

Notes: ^aJulia, Nao and Karen participated in both Cultural landscapes and Mt Fuji courses; ^ba student in Peace and conflict (Turkmenistan) participated in another course before. Since few students participated in the two courses, this student’s name is undisclosed

research interviews in a post-course survey carried out after all the short-term international courses. About 100 students filled out the surveys, and 26 were interested in participating in research interviews. The author e-mailed these students to explain the aims, procedures and ethical consideration for participation. Ultimately, 20 students were interviewed.

Data collection

The topics of the semi-structured interviews centred around the reasons for participation, pre-departure preparation, experiences on the trip and post-course projection for future study and self-development. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted in Japanese and lasted between 45 and 90 min. The author attended three courses (Cultural landscapes, Hungarian history, culture and architecture and Mt Fuji) and supervised students' activities throughout. This study did not examine differences and similarities between the courses; instead, this study explored the key themes of how the corresponding courses impacted the participants. Therefore, it is likely that the author's involvement does not distort the overall results of the study.

Analysis

The study design was informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis, which is an approach that aims to understand informants' views of their lived world and to elicit key themes of their experiences. To investigate students' views about the impact of the courses, the researcher first read the transcripts and coded text segments that represented students' perceptions of the impacts. Reading and rereading all the transcripts using Nvivo software (ver. 11.4.1), the researcher developed an initial exploratory coding scheme of key themes. The researcher then conducted more detailed and careful investigations to refine the coding scheme while re-listening to the audio recordings, which helped capture nuanced meanings of the experiences. Here, many sub-codes were merged or divided, although the major categories of the higher structure remained unchanged. After the analysis, the researcher utilised comparative coding and focused on the entire text segments of each code at once to ensure consistency. Finally, the researcher reviewed comment tags attached to unclear and borderline text segments in the prior procedures, and reclassified them to develop a refined final coding scheme. The researcher considered 20 interviews to be sufficient for reaching thematic saturation.

Before the submission of this manuscript, the results were presented in a casual seminar on short-term international programs offered in another department of the university. The author received positive responses about the validity of the major themes (Junichiro Shiomi, personal communication, 8 March 2017).

Findings

Four major themes arose from the analysis of students' reflections about the impacts of participating in the courses: personal development, generic skill, global perspective and subject-specific matter. All the students perceived that the course experiences influenced their personal development (295 text segments) and global perspectives (158 text segments). Most students talked about their development of generic skills (63 text segments) and meaningful impact from the delivery of subject-specific matter (57 text segments). Some text segments were coded with multiple themes, which suggests the multifaceted nature of impacts of the short-term international courses.

Theme 1: personal development

The personal development theme refers to the influence on students' characteristics and personalities including maturity, self-understanding, attitudes, tolerance, personal relationships and motivation for learning and development. The most frequently mentioned topic was revised

motivation for personal development and career trajectory: “In the first semester, I just wished to get good grades. In the second semester after I got back from Hungary, I felt like studying Christianity and world history” (Erika). Emily described her broadened perspective about potential career paths: “I saw people working in various workplaces in Germany. They seemed to work freely. I also heard from a peer that his acquaintance graduated from a university but could not get a job, so he went to Britain and started working at a pub. This made me realise that there are many life courses”. In addition, many students were inspired and impressed by the students in the host country and wanted to emulate their seriousness and commitment to learning: “I thought that all Hungarian students were amazingly serious about studying. In classes, everyone was seriously listening to lectures” (Erika).

Furthermore, as students deepened their understanding about themselves, they began to consider future studies or career trajectories. In one course activity, George played a delegate role in a model EU conference and recalled, “I didn’t consider pursuing an international relations career. I thought that working as a delegate of a nation to serve for a central government and taking a leadership role for the people was not what I wanted to do”. Dan expressed respect for his course mates concerning their English skills and stated, “Other participants from the same university were brilliant. I could not catch up with them [...] I keenly felt the weakness of my English skills. They were very good at English”. He felt disappointed with his own English skills and said that he was not yet ready to think about long-term exchange programme participation.

Students’ experiences with newly formed networks of peers often fell within the themes of personal development. They spent a great deal of time with local and home university students, going outdoors, sightseeing and playing sports outside of the formal schedule. Haruki described his new friendships with local people: “I belonged to an orienteering club here (in Japan), and I had the chance to take part in a competition over there (in Australia) with Australian people. Recently I interacted with them on Facebook”. A student in a humanity major found it valuable to get to know science major students from the same university: “I interacted with peers in science, different people, became friends. I considered getting to know people in various fields as a very good experience”. Students’ contacts with various people have continued beyond the short-term experiences.

Another major topic was the perceived impact on students’ mindsets, personalities, tolerance and patience. Eugene noted the importance of being more independent from teachers: “We had a lot of free time in the course. In a different (short-term international) course, which I enrolled in before, everything was fixed. In that regard, I was made to become aware that I relied too much on teachers. I thought I should have been more proactive”. Maria similarly developed her personal theory that learning outcomes in the course were totally up to each student’s mindset, and Anna forged her independence and confidence in living abroad.

Theme 2: global perspective

The students described their experiences of acquiring new perspectives related to different people and cultures. They learned different social norms, cultural traditions and thought patterns as well as a novel perspective of Japanese culture. Dan, for example, depicted an experience that he had seldom had in Japan: “Local students used Kazakh, Russian, English, and a fourth language. They were very fluent in them”. A student interested in folk dancing enthusiastically explained authentic Hungarian dancing styles that were different from the ones she had previously learned (Maria). Students’ acquired global perspectives were often illustrated by comparing the new situation with that of their home country. Kei mentioned his surprise at the cultural differences and stated, “Females wearing long black attire [referring to a stereotypical Muslim female] blended in the local community”, which is uncommon in Japan. Kei also stated, “A German language teacher was friendly. He said, ‘Why don’t we study and talk through games?’ I thought it was a cultural difference

from Japan". Maria admired the city scenery in Budapest for its preservation effort and said, "The scenery in the city was completely different from the ones in Japan".

Several students appreciated global experience through their new international friendships. While working with their counterpart students, they encountered peers' different ways of thinking from their own. Leo said, "Having an opportunity to interact with Australian students, being able to become good friends with those in the same academic year allowed us to ask them closely about various things". Sho said, "In class discussions with those from different backgrounds, I often realised 'they are thinking about different things.'" Moreover, the development of students' global perspectives was not only associated with outward views, but also inward sensitivity about Japan and Japaneseness, as Sho's statement about the Mount Fuji course illustrates: "We participated in Japanese language lessons [designed for Australian students]. After simple phrase lessons, we started to learn some sentence structure. I thought it got difficult to teach". He was struck by the fact that learning his mother tongue was not easy. A student who visited China (Anna) said, "I thought I wanted to become more capable of explaining Japan and its history. Since I major in science, I have shied away from learning about them".

Theme 3: generic skills

The students were appreciative of opportunities where they improved generic skills, that is, skills which can be applied across different subject fields and contexts. They highlighted many opportunities for foreign language interaction with local people and students. Ken described his experience, which was typical: "I learned that I had to proactively initiate communication with others, which made my (English) communication skills improve". Nao was also aware that he became capable of understanding Australian teachers' and colleagues' English talk:

In the beginning, when I heard Professor [Australian professor's name] talking, I thought, it was like, "it's too fast to understand!" But, at the end of the course, I realised that I could catch what the professor was saying. It was a wonderful experience.

The second major topic of the theme was group work management skills. Leo and Ray and some others similarly said they learned how to create a coherent presentation with others through exchanging ideas, mutually adjusting their arguments and constructing discussions together. Haruki learned from his failure:

We divided work for the presentation (to the group members). However, we were struck by the fact that different members set different goals. We were like, making three different presentations around one large theme. Now I believe that you should start from discussing a theme together then move on to summarising and presenting. Learning this made the experience worth it.

Another topic that students reiterated was their development of discussion skills. A student with good English oral skills (Eugene) related his efforts and success in leading a discussion in which other students were apt to digress from their main goals. Another student purposefully concentrated on what others were saying and learned how others mutually communicated in discussions. Similarly, some others learned from their peers how to efficiently create presentation slides, phrase a problem statement, respond to the audience and track the argument while they were preparing for a presentation with host peers.

Theme 4: subject-specific matter

Since the short-term international courses were imbedded in the university curriculum, the fourth theme encapsulates students' learning of course-related knowledge. They learnt from lectures as well as through site visits and peer interaction. For example, a series of classroom lectures provided them with learning experiences. Karen reported, "A teacher told us that Mt Fuji is formed of multiple layers, and I thought 'seriously?' I was strongly struck by it".

She was surprised that she did not know this since Mt Fuji is the most famous Japanese mountain. Learning opportunities were also available outside the classroom setting. Haruki visited an Australian botanic garden as a site visit and had a chance to look over the status of an unfamiliar flora. Julia, who also visited Australia, explained:

Mere knowledge (in traditional classrooms) seldom allowed me to create a concrete understanding. It was more interesting and unforgettable for me to see that they, for example, aboriginal people, lived in this environment, this event occurred in this place, and a cultural legacy like this still remained.

Peers from different backgrounds often offered the students resources to ignite their intellectual curiosity. Sho valued the opportunity to casually talk about the national identity of international students studying in Australia and said, “It was surprising that I came across topics like war identity and national identity in the course of cultural landscapes”. Nao, seeing Australian peers buy Japanese green tea flavour sweets as a souvenir, wondered why so many foreign people were interested in it even though there were many other different typical Japanese sweets displayed at the shop. He said, “it made me think about Japanese symbolic images, it was like Ninja (Japanese ancient spy agent) or Geisha (Japanese ancient female entertainer) as classic examples, also like Mt Fuji”.

These excerpts related to subject-specific matter demonstrate that students’ learning occurred at various locations: lecture rooms, field sites and informal settings. New knowledge concerning course contents was presented not only by instructors but also by their peers.

Structuring the impact of short-term international courses

Many experiences were coded with two or more themes, which indicates the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon (Table II). Two themes, global perspective and personal development, were most frequently added on identical text segments (70 cases). Access to a new global environment inspired students’ motivation for future study, self-understanding and self-confidence. Leo, for example, developed a new interest in Australia (global perspective) and started thinking about his future study ambitions (personal development). He stated, “I became interested in Australia. Talking about university studies, I want to go there again for a short while. I became interested in exchange programs after visiting there”. A student who went to Turkmenistan expressed her disappointment in herself:

We didn’t know what we should have known about Japan while Turkmen students knew about Turkmenistan. The Turkmen students had questions about Japan, but I could not give adequate answers such as the Japanese basic foreign diplomacy, things like that. I was interested in international issues, but I thought I was looking into the outside of Japan too much and had little understanding about the inside. The Turkmen students were, it was like, reciting Turkmen foreign policies and words of admiration for Turkmenistan, whereas we could not discuss the issue to the same degree.

She was shocked by how much Turkmens of the same generation understood their own country and had questions about Japan (global perspective). She recognised that she

Table II.
Frequencies of text segments coded with two major themes and number of students commenting on the themes

| | Frequencies of text segments | | | | No. of students who commented |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Subject-specific matter | Generic skill | Global perspective | Personal development | |
| 1. Subject-specific matter | – | 0 | 12 | 10 | 14 |
| 2. Generic skill | | – | 1 | 19 | 15 |
| 3. Global perspective | | | – | 70 | 20 |
| 4. Personal development | | | | – | 20 |

understood little about Japan and determined to learn more hereafter (personal development). In addition, Ken built a solid friendship with Hungarian students and learned their lifestyles through day-to-day interaction in both class and excursions (global perspective). Through his successful experience, he gained confidence to interact with peers of a different background and language (personal development).

Students' experiences of personal development were also often intertwined with generic skills (19 cases). Most examples of generic skill are associated with new tips for interacting in a foreign language, and personal development entailed students' self-awareness and motivation for self-development. Maria became strikingly aware of her weakness in participating in class discussions (personal development). This experience simultaneously made her put more effort into posing questions in class, talking more frequently with professors after lessons and developing strategies for how she would increase opportunities to take turns in group work (generic skill). Ken also struggled communicating effectively in English during the course, but he learned how to communicate in his moderate command of English: "I learned how to have a conversation anyway with my messy grammar" (generic skill). He continued, based on the experience, that "I could understand how I would develop my English skills in the future" (personal development).

Naomi's experience provided a clear example of multidimensional experiences relevant to subject-specific matter and personal development (ten cases). She was fascinated by a lecture about religion (subject-specific matter), a topic she had never studied before, and she acknowledged that she had no concrete ideas about religion from a Japanese point of view and that she did not have anything to contribute to the discussion. Even though her English skill level was high, she could not contribute to the discussion. Her learning of new subject-specific matter fuelled her motivation to study the field more (personal development).

Some students' global perspective experiences were told in relation to their learning of subject-specific matter (12 cases). Karen conveyed her new comparative insights between Japanese and Australian ancient traditions and spirituality based on field trips about aboriginal culture: "Ancient aboriginal and Japanese people were doing the same things. In museums, videos, and aboriginal people's talks, I thought that people's understanding about the land differs, but their fundamental worship that ancients' souls are imbedded in the land is actually similar". Another student valued a lecture about contemporary asylum seekers and immigrants in Eastern Europe (subject-specific matter). The topic was a global issue in nature, but she also appreciated local Hungarian students' views about them (global perspective). The solo example of the impact on student's global perspectives and generic skills arose from Ray's experience working intensively with foreign students. He learned how an Australian group mate organised group works, developed problem statements and coherent discussions and interacted with audiences in presentations (generic skill), and he was impressed recalling that "students over here (in Australia) were very skilful. We seldom do these things (presentation and group work) in Japan" (global perspective).

Furthermore, Karen frequently commented on her experiences within three themes: global perspective, subject-specific matter and personal development. Her learning experiences were influenced by field trips and lectures about the local cultural landscapes such as climate change in Australia (subject-specific matter), new comparative understandings of the current Australian and Japanese situations (global perspective) and enhanced awareness of her own country and herself as Japanese (personal development).

Discussion

Limitations

The academic topics of the courses substantially centred around humanities and social sciences, but there were some natural science components. Therefore, this study did not set

out to present the generalised impacts of any short-term international courses. Although the sample size satisfied the need for good variation, another limitation was that the study addressed an undergraduate cohort at one particular university. Moreover, this paper primarily depended on students' self-reported experiences, and they may have spoken about the impact of the courses positively because it is more socially desirable (Rahikainen and Hakkarainen, 2013). A prior study indicated the different nature between students' and faculty's perceptions of students' learning outcomes in short-term study abroad courses; faculty focused more on generalised skills and topics while students reported more concrete and task-driven outcomes (Deans, 2011). However, despite the differing nature, the coverage of the students' perceived experiences and teachers' expectations was consistent (Deans, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, the interview approach inevitably encouraged the students to reflect upon their experiences and to become aware of the impact of the courses. This methodological challenge posed a question: did students who were not interviewed experience the same impacts as those who were? The rationale of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014) emphasises the importance of students reflecting on their experience for their development, and Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) stress that international experience does not necessarily induce effective experiential learning. It is yet uncertain if students who had no interviews perceived the course impact the same way as the interview participants in this study did.

Nevertheless, revealing students' experiences in short-term international courses at a non-English-speaking university offers valuable glimpses into the nascent pedagogical practices for future course development. The in-depth nature of our approach enabled insights grounded in students' experiences and invites further confirmation and exploration through different approaches and in different contexts.

Reflections on findings

This study showed that short-term international courses had multifaceted impacts on participants' development. The results generally supported arguments for the effectiveness of short-term international courses because the participants recognised many positive impacts that the courses had on their development. In particular, all the informants commented on the experiences of personal development and global perspective (e.g. Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Ferrari and Fine, 2016). Among them, the most oft-heard refrain was a revised motivation for future study and career opportunities, which was classified as personal development (e.g. Dolby, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Tarrant and Lyons, 2012).

The results also revealed that the students engaged in learning not only through instructor-led classes and guided site visits but also through peer interactions with students from host institutions and their home university. By engaging in course activities and out-of-class interactions with peers, students attained new perspectives about certain course topics and re-evaluated their self-understanding and attitudes about university study. Drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014), information from peers with different backgrounds provided the students with new experiences unfamiliar to them (experiencing) and unique ways to interpret course topics and social encounters on site helped them facilitate their personal insight formation from innovative perspectives (abstracting). For learning to occur, one needs experience which violates one's beliefs and ways of thinking (Kolb, 2014). As such, interaction with foreign peers ignited students' experience and abstract conceptualisation, which further guided them to reflection and active experimentation. This finding conforms to some previous findings. For example, studies have shown that students in international courses generally appreciated opportunities to interact with other students (Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Ferrari and Fine, 2016; Gomez-Lanier, 2017) and that multicultural viewpoints enriched students' understanding of

subject matter (Ferrari and Fine, 2016; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018). This study adds an elaborated understanding of how those interactions contributed to students' personal development.

Another frequently mentioned topic was students' perceived development in foreign language communication skills. While a few students noted that they enhanced their lexical and grammatical knowledge, the majority of students appreciated the opportunities where they actually communicated in target languages in authentic settings because they managed to make themselves understood and acquired instantly useful communicative strategies. Their reflections implied that students are ready to engage in challenging foreign language settings, but their home university has not yet successfully offered them an academic environment in which to use communicative foreign language skills in a meaningful way.

Many prior studies have exclusively presented positive outcomes and impacts of short-term international courses, but there has been little research on the potentially unfavourable effects of participating in such courses. All the informants except for one mentioned deriving positive motivation for prospective study and career opportunities. One student lost his confidence in pursuing a year-long exchange programme since his English skills were not as good as his same-university peers. Weaver and Tucker (2010) illustrated that some students experienced severe culture shock and homesickness during a two-week Southeast Asia trip. The courses of this study were, in principle, designed for students with minimum international experiences. Pedagogical support should be considered to reduce this "insider's culture shock", although the longitudinal impact of this experience is yet unknown.

The analysis of students' descriptions suggested that the impact areas of short-term international courses were closely intertwined (Figure 1). The themes of global perspective and personal development most closely overlapped each other. The lack of association between subject-specific matter and generic skills seems logically convincing since subject-specific matter concerns in-depth knowledge and skills pertaining to a particular academic field, whereas generic skills covers a broader context and includes independent skill sets applicable to wider subject domains.

Although prior studies have collectively offered a useful inventory of the impacts of short-term international courses, this study presents a new look at students' learning experiences in equivalent courses. In fact, the multifaceted nature of impact structure is in line with Campbell's (2016) argument that the objectives of short-term international courses are interrelated. Of course, the degree to which the elements overlap may differ according to the course objectives and what is emphasised in the course. However, the model offers a more nuanced understanding of the potentials for students' development, and it may also help course leaders efficiently analyse their courses. More empirical evidence is needed to examine this hypothetical model to address its validity and practical usefulness.

The results indicated a less significant impact of subject-specific matter of the course than the opportunity of personal and global perspective development, which two-thirds of students

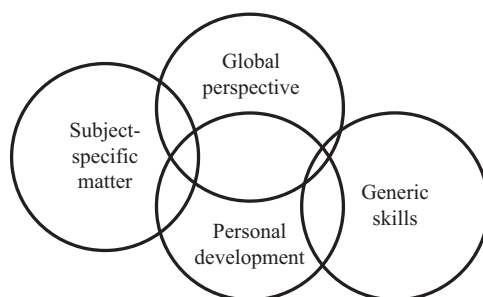


Figure 1.
Impact structure of
short-term
international courses

commented on. This finding may be attributable to the nature of the student cohort and their university curriculum. All the informants except for one were in the first or second year and had not yet committed to their major subject. Accordingly, they were not necessarily interested in the particular domain content of the courses as their future primary major field. Rather, they were interested in international experience in general; hence, some of them might not be substantially enthusiastic about the course contents *per se*. Students' limited linguistic skills may be another reason that discipline-specific subject matter did not have more of an impact. Many students described challenging moments in understanding lectures and discussions. If students were struggling to understand the lectures and assignments, it might explain the lack of clear impacts related to the understanding of subject-specific matter. Setting the educational uniqueness of the university aside, this moderate level of impact may account for why short-term international courses have been evaluated as less academic (Davies, 2006; Koernig, 2007; Rahikainen and Hakkarainen, 2013).

However, the short-term international courses provided the students with unique impacts on their development, which the traditional classroom format and home institution did not offer (Guyer, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018). For example, students formed new international and even home-university peer networks through intensive collaborative and co-living experiences, developed practical strategies to make themselves understood in a foreign language in authentic settings and acquired inspiring perspectives about how ardently students abroad study at university. Arguably, peer networks may not be regarded as academic learning outcomes in a narrower sense, but the students often found these networks meaningful and pointed out that their interactions with international and domestic peers stimulated their motivation to cultivate themselves in the future. This finding supports an argument in Jones *et al.* (2012) that research focusing on the personal meaningfulness of students' experiences as well as academic outcomes may allow researchers to expand their scope in understanding students' learning experiences. Existing literature has shown that university students' experiences of peer collaboration and friendships are often tied to their retention and avoidance of negative behaviour (Lowis and Castley, 2008; Pittman and Richmond, 2008; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). Most participants in this study were first- or second-year students, and the impact of the course may be influential on their future studies. Another study argued that participants in short-term international courses appreciated the opportunity to work intensively with other students (Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018), which was also the case in this study. This bears a sharp contrast to the dissatisfaction of some students in Koernig's (2007) study because too much focus on the academic components limited the opportunities for peer interaction.

Research has suggested that six major conditions account for high-impact practices on greater student engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007): educational practices that are worth effort and time; require interaction; bridge diversity; provide sufficient feedback; offer a connection to the world; and shake students' life course and values (Kuh, 2008). Short-term international courses can satisfy these conditions. The students spent great deals of time in an international setting and made an effort to communicate in a foreign language, which naturally entailed peer interaction and bridged diversity (e.g. Ferrari and Fine, 2016) because they received immediate responses in informal dialogues from peers. Students experienced that what they had learned in language classrooms had practical utility in the real world, and site visits gave them tangible objects of learned contents (e.g. Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Ferrari and Fine, 2016). Furthermore, the students cultivated new academic interests and even career paths. Accordingly, students' perceptions of experiences supported the significance of the courses as high-impact practices.

Our study further demonstrated that short-term international courses encouraged students to be internationally equipped, such as through communicative development and

cultural understanding, while also inspiring them to reflect upon their future developmental trajectories and academic attitudes as university students. The analysis also suggested that the courses satisfied the conditions for high-impact practices and offered high-quality learning experiences. This study did not examine students' continuing development of solid knowledge, skills and attitudes, and more work remains to be carried out to resolve how students develop after the sojourn. Nevertheless, the results highlighted the quality of these short-term international courses that may have broad impacts on students' development beyond language skills and global awareness (Campbell, 2016; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018). This finding supports the scope of the study, which attempted to capture students' learning experience comprehensively.

Pedagogical implications

Continuous enhancement of pedagogical practices is important for current university teachers. The students of this study less often related the impact of academic subject-specific matter, and this result provided the author with an important mission: to consider how students' learning of academic subject matter can be improved. Of course, these courses were primarily aimed at encouraging students to attain international experiences and perspectives, and thus, this finding did not immediately offset the effectiveness of the courses. However, individual course leaders should carefully consider methods of subject matter delivery, and further research should be conducted to propose effective pedagogical strategies for enhancing learning in international settings (Lakkala *et al.*, 2018). Although individual instructors are responsible for arranging course contents, Lakkala *et al.* (2018) argued that general guidelines for course design should be implemented based on empirical evidence, such as appropriate workload of lectures and social peer interaction, decent free time and suitable tasks. This study also agrees that peer collaboration and interaction enhanced the impact of the short-term international experience (e.g. Cotten and Thompson, 2017; Ferrari and Fine, 2016; Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Lakkala *et al.*, 2018). Relocating students overseas for a short while does not automatically offer an effective learning opportunity.

Our findings offer a conceptual tool for the design of new and existing courses. Hovde (2002) stressed the importance of making intercultural learning experiences explicit, and experiential learning theory encourages individuals' self-reflection on their experiences for effective development (Kolb, 2014). The four major themes elicited in this study are useful as cues for students' self-reflection. Recent trends in Japanese universities show that universities encourage (some even require) students to explicitly articulate and reflect on their academic achievements in the institutionally designed academic portfolio. The list of potential impacts of the short-term international courses would help students deepen their understanding of the areas of their prospective development.

Course leaders should also bear in mind that some students have little international communicative experience. Weaver and Tucker (2010) recommend a pre-departure meeting of compatriot members to create a familiar peer climate and to reduce the distress and risk of culture shock. The "insider's culture shock" may occur among same-university peers owing to the different levels of students' global competence. In contrast to common study abroad programs, this is a unique phenomenon in short-term international courses where a group of students from the same institution participate in the same course.

The results demonstrated the unique and meaningful impacts of short-term international courses, which traditional in-class courses do not offer. This suggests the importance of considering institutional educational strategies to link the experience with other formal and informal post-course learning opportunities for students' longitudinal development (Paige and Vande Berg, 2012). Although the short-term courses are more affordable than year- or semester-long exchange programs, they are still costly for both students and universities. Universities should consider designing more in-country global learning

opportunities and mapping an overview of relevant global learning opportunities on campus for students to take advantage of the irreplaceable experiences for their continuous development.

Future study

Future research on long-term impacts would be also valuable. The impact this study unpacked does not include continuing effects on students' development. We have little understanding of how students' experiences influence their development over the long term (Campbell, 2016; Chiefo and Griffiths, 2004; Hall *et al.*, 2016; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Landon *et al.*, 2017; Olson and Lalley, 2012; Tarrant and Lyons, 2012; Tucker *et al.*, 2011). Short-term international courses do not automatically guarantee that the impacts of the experiences will continue. Students may easily reinstate themselves in familiar cultural styles and have difficulty making good use of learning experiences after returning home (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). They often wish to share their experiences (Chiefo and Griffiths, 2004), but they may refrain from doing so since it can be distracting for other students (Wilson *et al.*, 2016).

Whereas there is abundant evidence that study abroad experiences contribute to student engagement (e.g. National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016), empirical research into which conditions of short-term international courses help do so is surprisingly lacking. This study described how the courses covered all the major conditions of high-impact practices for greater student engagement (Kuh, 2008). More research and practical suggestions by which course designers and leaders can strategically develop courses are essential to enhance the odds of students' effective development.

It is furthermore unclear how the conditions of high-impact practices (e.g. National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007) are associated with the development of students' skills, knowledge and attitudes. The students in this study experienced rich learning opportunities and engaged in high-impact practices, but the impact on their domain-specific knowledge development was suggested to be less conspicuous than that on their global awareness and personal growth. More empirical evidence is necessary to understand why this was the case.

In principle, the students who chose to enrol in elective international courses are probably more likely to be willing to acquire global competence. Future research is essential to identify how students without significant interest in developing their global competence would make sense of their experiences and impacts of the course.

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