

# Assessing the Efficacy of Study Abroad Pre-Departure Orientation Among Japanese University Students in Two Countries

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## Abstract

Pre-departure orientation for study abroad program is an important part of the study abroad journey of students. However, this aspect of the study abroad program is somehow neglected in the program offering. Few studies have investigated the efficacy of pre-departure orientation for study abroad from the experience of Japanese university students. Therefore, this paper aims to assess the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students' study abroad journey in two countries. The researcher utilized a descriptive phenomenology approach. An online survey using a semi-structured bilingual questionnaire was conducted between October to December 2024 among ten study abroad participants in Australia and the Philippines. The respondents were comprised of first year to fourth year students from University A and University B. The online survey data was extracted and Japanese responses were translated into English and analyzed thematically. The experience of Japanese university students on pre-departure orientation for study abroad program is grouped into five main themes and 15 sub-themes. The main themes include: (1) the perceived helpfulness and usefulness of the pre-departure activity for study abroad, (2) the main benefit of pre-departure activity for study abroad, (3) challenges during study abroad experience, (4) mechanisms to cope with the study abroad challenges, and (5) suggestions to improve the pre-departure activity for study abroad. The respondents assessed pre-departure orientation concerning their study abroad experience in Australia and the Philippines. The respondents consider information on specific topics about health, security, and leisure as the main points to enjoy their study abroad experience fully. Further research on pre-departure orientation for study abroad should be conducted.

**Keywords:** pre-departure orientation, study abroad, Japanese university students, internationalization, Australia, Philippines

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Rationale

Pre-departure orientation (PDO) is crucial in preparing students for the enriching experience of studying abroad (Kosman et. al, 2023). Prior research by Ryan-Krause (2016) and Shields et al. (2016) propose that pre-departure preparation improves the likelihood of students getting the profits that these programs offer. At the time of writing this paper, there is limited information on the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation, especially among Japanese university students. This article will assess the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation among Japanese university students. By investigating the views of university students towards pre-departure orientation, evaluating the impact of pre-departure orientation on the students' study abroad experiences, and identifying the students' challenges and coping mechanisms, this study aims to provide insights into how universities can better support students in navigating diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, this study will offer recommendations for improving the pre-departure orientation in study abroad (SA) programs to ensure students have a successful study abroad experience.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) gives importance to internationalization and collaboration between countries to guarantee that learners have equal prospects to access and complete premium higher education with globally accredited qualifications (Goris, 2020). This movement has altered higher education procedures on internationalization (Hanada, 2019; Tran et al., 2023). The campaign

for internationalization supported to promote study abroad programs as a means of “cross-border education” (Hanada, 2019). Seeing the increase in prospects to study abroad in different global destinations, many students choose to study overseas to learn a language (Ikeda, 2020). Japan’s number of students participating in study abroad programs shows that the country is part of the internationalization trend in higher education (Ikeda, 2020). In 2023, approximately 34,305 Japanese students joined in study abroad programs which included online and face-to-face options. The figure characterizes a noteworthy surge compared to the almost 15,000 students who studied abroad in 2021 in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic (ICEF Monitor, 2023). From 2019 to 2021, the inbound population of international students in Japan decreased because of the pandemic, the population at the higher education level remained between 5% and 6% as reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) symbolize the internationalization movement through the increasing number of students who participate in study abroad programs (Hanada, 2019; Jackson, 2010). Having more students participate in short-term study abroad programs, Yu (2010) stressed that it is important to prepare the students with the necessary information as they enter a foreign country with a pre-departure orientation prior to their trip to the host country. It is essential to prepare the participating students in study abroad programs as suggested by Ryan-Krause (2016) and Shields et al. (2016) to help students gain the full offerings entailed in these programs.

Despite the early implementation of study abroad programs which started in 1868 and 1872 (MEXT, 2009), there is limited information on the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation, especially among Japanese university students. Hence, this paper will fill this gap by assessing the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation among Japanese university students’ study abroad journey in two countries (Figure 1).

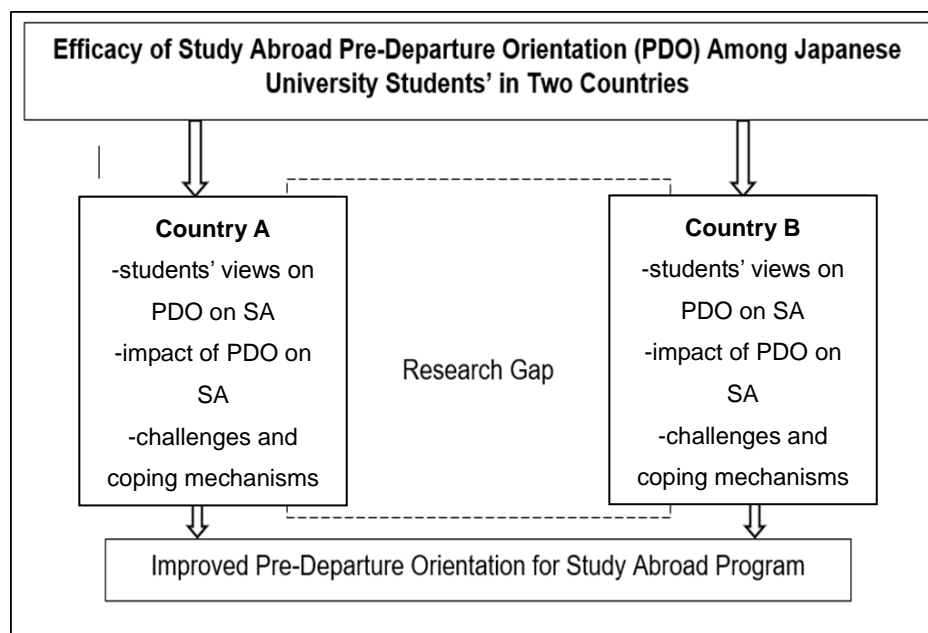


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

1.2 Research Objective

This study aims to assess the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students’ study abroad journey in two countries.

1.3 Review of Literature

In Japan, the field of study abroad showed fluctuations in the past years as reported by the Federation of Language and Education Consultant Associations and Japan Association of Overseas Studies (felca, 2023; JAOS, 2024). The value of pre-departure orientation is now showing emphasis following the increase in popularity of study abroad programs among college and university students, (Ryan-Krause, 2016; Shields et al., 2016). Pre-departure orientation for the study abroad program is a short course where students are provided with crucial

information before their study abroad journeys. The pre-departure orientation may comprise information on the host country's culture to assist in preparing the students for "a new living and learning environment" (Australian Collaborative Education Network, 2017; Tan, Tomlinson, & Flavell, 2015). The effectiveness of pre-departure orientation on study abroad programs has been a subject of interest among researchers and teachers. Parker (2011) and Chipchase et al. (2012) claimed that the lack of an appropriate and suitable foundation could lead to the students' lack of self-confidence and skill, an inferior study abroad experience, and more imposition on the host university.

Kironji et al. (2018) asserted that the main advantage of pre-departure orientation is it prepares the students on the difference between cultural, academic, and social norms in his/her home country and the "host country." Pre-departure orientation helps the students become familiar with the practices, language, and realities in the host countries, their level of culture shock is minimized and helps them navigate and have a better study abroad experience (Kironji, Cox, Edwardson, et al., 2018). For those university or college students who have more directed with their academic goals, it is important to know the university norms and expectations of the host country to ensure an efficacious academic exchange (Kironji, Cox, Edwardson, et al., 2018; Ryan-Krause, 2016; Shields et al., 2016).

Moreover, pre-departure orientation programs students to set "realistic expectations and goals" for their participation in the study abroad program (English, 2012). It provides information on the host country's educational bureaucracy, lifestyle, security, and access to resources. Those students who join pre-departure orientation are well-equipped to strategize and explore with their stay abroad (Douglas, 2020). Incorporating this information can create a more satisfying and educational experience aligned with the students' academic and personal aims (English, 2012; Douglas, 2020; Chan et al., 2021). Particularly, university and international students, may profit from pre-departure orientation in goal setting, networking, and retrieving field-specific academic resources (Chan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, pre-departure orientation may help students reinforce vital skills during their experience in studying abroad such as "intercultural competence, adaptability, and resilience" (Basow & Gaugler, 2017; Yarosha, Lukic, & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2018; Hanada, 2019). Pre-departure orientation helps students to leave their comfort zones and involved with new surroundings which can build their confidence and cultural capability (Douglas, 2020). The effectiveness of pre-departure orientation on study abroad involvements depends on whether it can prepare students for the difficulties and chances they may face in the host country (Douglas, 2020).

The current study differs from previous studies related to the pre-departure activities for the study abroad program which did not examine the experiences of students who participated in the program to assess the efficacy of the pre-departure activity. Although there are previous studies on the role of pre-departure activities in study abroad programs, the participants are mainly from English-speaking countries such as the USA (Efthymiou, 2023), UK, and EU (Peng & Wright, 2020) with one study having Japanese participants (Douglas, 2020). Furthermore, most of the data for these studies were collected before the actual study abroad participation of the students. With the limited literature on pre-departure activities for study abroad programs, the author aimed to shed more light on this issue by offering a new perspective that will focus on assessing the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students' study abroad journey in two countries. By examining the views of university students towards pre-departure orientation, evaluating the impact of pre-departure orientation on the students' study abroad experiences, and identifying the students' challenges, coping mechanisms, and suggestions, this study aims to provide insights into how universities can better support students in navigating diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, this study will offer recommendations for improving the pre-departure orientation in study abroad programs to ensure students have a successful study abroad experience.

## **2. Method**

This section contains the research design, respondents and research environment, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and rigor.

### *2.1 Research Design*

In this study, the descriptive phenomenology method was employed to evaluate the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students' study abroad journey in two countries, with a specific focus on their real-life experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This method is appropriate for the study because descriptive phenomenology examines the respondents' personal experiences to gather an understanding into the underlying sense of their experiences (Sundler et al., 2019) on the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students' study

abroad journey in two countries. In descriptive phenomenology, Giorgi (2009) posited that the crux of a phenomenon is exemplified by a “descriptive paragraph” which summarizes the overall framework of an experience. This study will assess the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students’ study abroad journey in two countries.

### 2.2 Respondents and Research Environment

This study used purposive sampling by Paton (2015) to select Japanese university students who participated and will participate in the study abroad program in Australia and the Philippines in the school year 2024-2025 from two private universities in Japan. The purposive sampling technique was considered suitable for this study because the data source will be appropriate to answer the research objective (Ali & et al., 2021; Liamputtong & Rice, 2021). Only Japanese university students who have participated and will participate in the study abroad program in Australia and the Philippines were included. Those who did not and will not participate in the study abroad program and those who participated and will participate in the study abroad program in countries other than Australia and the Philippines were excluded from the current study.

Once approved by the ethics committee, written study descriptions and explanations for voluntary and informed participation were provided to the respondents before data collection. Online surveys were scheduled according to the convenience of the respondents. The interview questions were continually reviewed to ensure their universality throughout the study.

### 2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from October to December 2024, through online surveys using a bilingual semi-structured questionnaire (Table 1). The questionnaire was developed according to the published literature on the pre-departure orientation for the study abroad program and after consultations with two external auditors specialized in qualitative research. The final questionnaire was confirmed after many discussions and reviews by the author and the external auditors; and the approval of the university ethics committee. The author conducted an online survey since interviews were not possible due to schedule conflicts. Before the survey, the respondents were informed about the study's purpose, procedure, and principles of confidentiality, and their informed and voluntary consent was obtained. Each survey questionnaire is estimated to last 15 to 30 minutes to accomplish. The sample size was decided when the survey responses reached saturation. A QR code was given to the respondent and he/she was given 15 to 30 minutes to complete the survey on the same day. The data from the online survey was extracted online for data analysis. All the data will only be accessible by the author. Once the data collection was completed, data analysis followed.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Questionnaire

Interview Questions /インタビューの質問
1. Please introduce yourself (gender, age, year level, etc.). 自己紹介をしてください（性別、年齢、学年、etc.）
2. Please describe your view/opinion about the pre-departure orientation before your study abroad experience. 留学前のオリエンテーションについて、どのようにお考えですか？
3. How did the pre-departure orientation help or not help your study abroad experiences? 出発前のオリエンテーションは、あなたの留学体験にどのように役立ちましたか、役立ちませんでしたか？
4. During the study abroad program, what were the challenges that you experienced? 留学中、苦労したことは何ですか？
5. How did you deal with the challenges during your study abroad experience? 留学中、どのように困難に対処しましたか？
6. What thoughts or suggestions about the pre-departure orientation would help improve the study abroad experience? 出発前のオリエンテーションについて、どのような考えや提案があれば、留学経験をより良いものにできるとおもいますか？

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the gathered data consistent with the research design (Sundler et al., 2019; Giorgi A., 2009). Data analysis was performed by the author and was reviewed by external auditors. The survey responses were translated (in the case of Japanese responses) and reviewed to ensure accuracy. In the preliminary stage, the author read the translated responses to get familiar with the data, explore the respondents' experiences, and discover unique and fresh perspectives. The next stage was coding, pattern organizing, and identifying the emerging themes. Lastly, is organizing the themes into major themes (Sundler et al., 2019). These were done with the consensus of the author and the external auditors.

### 2.5 Ethical Considerations

The implementation of this study was approved by the Kyushu Kyoritsu University ethics review board (approval no. 2024-15). Before conducting the surveys, the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, its significance, and the process to guarantee that this study will adhere to the ideologies of informed consent and confidentiality. After obtaining the respondents' informed and voluntary consent, their responses were replaced with a letter-number code in the survey log to ensure their confidentiality, and the respondents were informed that the collected data would be exclusively utilized for the study and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. The collected data will only be used for research purposes. The collected data was stored with a security pin and can only be accessed by the author. After five years, the data will be destroyed.

### 2.6 Rigor

The standard of rigor in the current study was based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research. Online surveys were conducted open-mindedly and survey notes (composed of reflections and experiences) were verified at least twice by external auditors to guarantee their credibility. The survey notes and data were constantly reviewed by the author to ensure the reliability of the data analysis. Regular meetings with external auditors were held during the research process to verify data and maintain objectivity. Lastly, data restoration was performed to analyze and retain the raw data objectively, guaranteeing consistency.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Respondents

Ten participating students in the study abroad program in Australia and the Philippines agreed to and responded to the online survey. It took them 15 – 30 minutes to complete the online survey form. Our respondents were from University A and University B. The mean age of the participants was 21.3 (SD = 0.46) years. Among the respondents, eight were male (80%) and two were female (20%). Two of the participants were first-year university students (20%), six were second-year university students (60%), one was a third-year university student (10%), and one was a fourth-year university student (10%). The study did not collect the data on their major. Table 2 shows the detailed information on the respondents' demographic profile.

Table 2. Respondents' Demographic Profile

Respondent No.	Sex	Age	Year Level
N1	Male	21	First Year
N2	Male	22	Fourth Year
N3	Male	21	First Year
N4	Male	21	Second Year
N5	Male	21	Second Year
N6	Male	22	Third Year
N7	Male	21	Second Year
N8	Female	21	Second Year
N9	Female	21	Second Year
N10	Male	21	Second Year

Five main themes emerged from respondents' descriptions, including the perceived helpfulness and usefulness of the pre-departure activity for study abroad, the main benefit of pre-departure activity for study abroad, challenges during study abroad experience, mechanisms to cope with the study abroad challenges, and suggestions to improve the pre-departure activity for study abroad.

### 3.2 Perceived Helpfulness and Usefulness of the Pre-departure Activity for Study Abroad

All the respondents had a positive attitude towards the conduct of the pre-departure orientation activity for the study abroad program. They think the pre-departure orientation activity is helpful and useful in their study abroad journey.

#### 3.2.1 Gaining Confidence for the Study Abroad Experience

Many respondents think that the pre-departure orientation activity for the study abroad program would be helpful in their study abroad experience. The respondents mentioned that they gained confidence in joining the study abroad program.

*"I think it's (the pre-departure orientation activity) very helpful. I got a little confident on how to deal with the locals and represent Japan." (N4)*

*"I think it will be very helpful. I gained confidence and learned that it wasn't just about having fun." (N9)*

#### 3.2.2 The Usefulness of the Pre-departure Orientation in Learning About Other Culture

Aside from gaining confidence, the respondents also mentioned the usefulness of the pre-departure orientation activity in terms of learning new things about other country and their cultures.

*"The orientation is very useful because I was able to learn other culture(s) and will experience it firsthand." (N2)*

*"I think it will be useful for studying abroad because you can learn what you need to do when studying abroad and what to talk about." (N5)*

*"I found it very useful to learn for the first time and gain new sensations." (N10)*

### 3.3 Main Benefit of Pre-departure Activity During Study Abroad

The respondents indicated four topics tackled during the pre-departure activity most beneficial to them in their study abroad experience: health management, knowledge of local climate, dos and don'ts, and security.

#### 3.3.1 Health Management

The majority of the respondents mentioned the importance of health management while they were in the host country.

*"It was important to know who to contact when I am sick or not feeling well while I am abroad." (N1)*

*"I was happy that health management in the host country was mentioned during the pre-departure activity because it is good to know how to take care of health while not in Japan." (N4)*

*"I did not do personal research on this topic, good thing it was covered during the pre-departure orientation. I learned basic information such as the emergency numbers to call in case of a health emergency, etc." (N8)*

#### 3.3.2 Knowledge of Local Climate

Another topic from the pre-departure activity that was found useful by the respondents while participating in the study abroad program was the knowledge of local climate.

*"I'm glad we were told about the temperature (climate) in the host country during our study abroad program, so we were able to bring the right clothing." (N3)*

*"I was able to bring enough change of clothes to the host country. I also brought deodorant because it is always summer in the Philippines." (N5)*

#### 3.3.3 Dos and Don'ts

The respondents also revealed that knowing the dos and don'ts was beneficial to them for their trip and stay in the host country.

*"It was good to know the preparations and precautions for participating in short-term overseas training. I did not have any hassle in the customs." (N2)*

*"I followed the information on what to bring and I was glad that the information during the pre-departure orientation was true based on what I experienced. I would have packed more if this topic was not included in the*

orientation. (N8)

*“Knowing what you cannot bring to a host country saves a lot of time and stress, it was also useful to know where to put your money while in the host country. Tourists seem to be an easy target for snatchers, so knowing how much money to bring while outside and where to put it really matters.” (N9)*

### 3.3.4 Security

The respondents also reported that the topic on security during the pre-departure orientation activity helped them during their study- abroad experience.

*“Knowing what you cannot bring to a host country saves a lot of time and stress, it was also useful to know where to put your money while in the host country. Tourists seem to be an easy target for snatchers, so knowing how much money to bring while outside and where to put it really matters.” (N9)*

*“One thing that made a huge difference during my study abroad experience was the issue on security. It made a big impact to me when the teacher told us to be vigilant during the pre-departure orientation. I was not paranoid, but I was careful with my stuff because I am not in Japan. It makes me appreciate the Japanese people more.” (N10)*

### 3.4 Challenges During Study Abroad Experience

The respondents also mentioned the challenges that they faced while they were on their study- abroad journey. Language barriers, transportation, and homogeneous classes were the main challenges faced by the respondents in Australia and the Philippines.

#### 3.4.1 Language Barriers

The respondents' main challenge from both countries was the language barrier. Concerning their English language level, they found it difficult to express themselves in English while they were in their host countries in basic conversations such as connecting to the internet and asking for help.

*“I didn't know how to connect to Wi-Fi, so it was difficult to ask the locals. Because they couldn't understand Japanese, I had to communicate it myself in English.” (N1)*

*“I couldn't communicate with locals and international students from other countries in English.” (N2)*

*“Language barriers in case of trouble. I did not know how to ask for help in case there is an emergency.” (N4)*

*“I went there without being able to speak English at all. I did not know what they were saying.” (N7)*

*“It was hard for me to understand their English. It was too fast for me to get what they were saying.” (N8)*

#### 3.4.2 Transportation

Another challenge that the respondents faced during their study abroad experience was transportation. The fare rates were not clear to the respondents and others did not know the direction to the host school.

*“At first I didn't understand what they were saying. If you only (single passenger), they charge you more.” (N10)*

Some did not know how to get to the university.

*“I did not know how to get to school.” (N3)*

#### 3.4.3 Homogeneous Classes

One of the challenges faced by the respondents during the study abroad program was the sectioning of the host school based on nationality. This limited the respondents' access to communicate with other international students within their class and speak English.

*“It was like being in Japan, the classmates are all Japanese so we speak Japanese.” (N2)*

*“There were almost Japan students in the class, so I couldn't make friends abroad and speak in English.” (N9)*

### 3.5 Mechanisms to Cope With the Study Abroad Challenges

Although some respondents had passive behavior towards the challenges and difficulties, they experienced during the study abroad program by enduring the discomfort and inconvenience, the majority of them tried to find effective mechanisms to improve their situation. The frequently used mechanisms were 1) asking people and facing the challenge directly, 2) using of translation apps, and 3) using non-verbal communication.

#### 3.5.1 Asking People and Facing the Challenge Directly

Most respondents asked school authorities and their friends how to deal with the challenges they faced during the

study abroad program.

*“Ask your host mother, teachers, friends, etc.” (N3)*

*“I talked to my friends.” (N4)*

*Some used the challenging situation as a chance to learn the English language.*

*“I took notes on words I didn’t understand in class and conversation, and used my notes to review them.” (N2)*

*“During my lunch break, I sat alone and talked to the person sitting next to me.” (N9)*

*“By having them speak slowly and explain the meaning of the words, I was able to understand them little by little...” (N10)*

### 3.5.2 Utilizing Mobile Applications

As a last resort, the respondents used translation applications (apps) to convey what they wanted to say.

*“I felt really shy but I had to use Google Translate.” (N7)*

*“I use Google Translate as a last resort when things are too hard to say.” (N8)*

For transportation issues, they would use a transportation application.

*“...Also, when it comes to transportation, I check the price on Grab and negotiate a lower price, and if it is still not possible, I refuse.” (N10)*

### 3.5.3 Use of Non-verbal Communication

Some respondents preferred to use non-verbal communication to get their message across.

*“For the time being, I did my best to convey it using gestures and pen and paper.” (N1)*

### 3.6 Suggestions to Improve the Pre-departure Activity for Study Abroad

After they participated in the pre-departure activity for study abroad and actual study abroad experience, the respondents gave some suggestions to improve the pre-departure activity for study abroad. Specific health management information, local tourism information, and homestay procedures were the topics that the respondents indicated to improve the pre-departure activity for study abroad.

#### 3.6.1 Specific Health Management Information

The respondents suggested including specific health management information on the host country such as infectious diseases and dangers of the sea.

*“It would be nice to include Information on Infectious Diseases Abroad so the students are more careful about their health and what they are eating outside the host university / school.” (N2)*

*“I think a topic about the dangers of the sea would be useful, especially for those with beach and water activities included in the program.” (N3)*

#### 3.6.2 Local Tourism Information

The respondents also indicated including information on local tourism to guide future study abroad participants on what can be seen and what is happening around the community where the host university/school is located.

*“It would be helpful to include shops, restaurants and famous spots in the vicinity. Local research to make it a fulfilling holiday.” (N1)*

*“The topic on prices and events would be useful.” (N6)*

*“We should include information about the area around the study abroad destination (school).” (N10)*

#### 3.6.3 Homestay Procedures

The final topic that the respondents want to be included in is about homestay procedures, such as changing homestay arrangements.

*“The study abroad participants would be happy to know the procedures for changing homestay arrangements.” (N8)*

## 4. Discussion

This study assessed the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students’ study abroad journey in two countries. In this study, the pre-departure orientation was seen to be helpful, useful, and beneficial by the respondents who participated in the pre-departure



orientation and the study abroad program in Australia and the Philippines. Particularly, the respondents found the pre-departure orientation helped them gain confidence and learn about other cultures before their trip abroad. These findings were consistent with previous studies, where one investigated the preparedness of healthcare students preparing for international clinical work (Kironji, Cox, & Edwardson et al., 2018) and the other one reviewed various pre-departure training programs and their effectiveness in preparing students for international experiences (Kalbarczyk, Nagourney, & Martin, 2019). One more study explored the reflections of Japanese university students after they participated in a three-week study abroad program in Canada (Douglas, 2020). These studies emphasize the importance of cultural competence and safety training in pre-departure orientation which in turn builds the self-confidence of the student-participants to explore another country and be out of their “comfort zone.” As stated in the literature, pre-departure orientation provides cultural information to the participants which may help minimize culture shock upon entering the host country. The pre-departure orientation offered by the university is effective, but it needs improvement to suit the timely needs of the students participating in the study abroad programs.

The main benefits of pre-departure orientation observed by the respondents during their study abroad program participation were health management, knowledge of local climate, dos and don'ts, and security. These topics were essential to provide the study abroad participants with realistic expectations of the actual scenarios and norms in the host country including the customs and immigration procedures to lessen the stress on their part and lessen the risks in terms of their security (Ryan-Krause, 2016; Shields et al., 2016; Kironji, Cox, & Edwardson et al., 2018; Kosman & et al., 2023).

Japanese university students faced some challenges while participating in the study abroad program. Surprisingly, the challenges faced by the group in Australia and the Philippines were the same. The students identified language barriers (Yeoh & Terry, 2013; Park, 2016; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), transportation (Monteiro & et al., 2021), and homogeneous classes as the main difficulties experienced. This finding is crucial in improving the topics covered during the pre-departure orientation. It is notable that aside from the language barrier, which may be addressed during the pre-departure orientation using conversation dialogues, the other concerns can only be addressed by the host university. Although suggestions on the use of travel apps can be provided during the pre-departure orientation, local knowledge on the using means of transportation has more weight.

This study revealed that Japanese study-abroad participants adopted a variety of mechanisms to cope with the challenges they encountered that were within their control to resolve. There are varied mechanisms the respondents used to break the language barrier: asking people and facing the challenge directly, the use of translation apps, and the use of non-verbal communication. Some students would request their classmates and friends to speak slowly so they can understand what the other person is saying. Some would try to use their free time such as having lunch at the school cafeteria and starting a conversation with someone. Others would take notes on the words that they did not understand and study them once back in the dorm. Others opted to use non-verbal communication and act out what they wanted to say. As a last resort, other students would use translation apps and let the phone get their message across (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Before using translation apps to deal with the language barrier, the other mechanisms allowed the students to practice their English communication skills. Regarding transportation, a travel application was deemed to be the solution by the respondents. Travel apps are somehow viewed as safe and reliable in getting a ride aside from their convenience despite the high price it entails compared to public transportation (Wu, Ma, Wang, & Li, 2022; Tiwari, Kaurav, & Koay, 2024). The issue of class sectioning with concentrated nationalities could only be addressed by the host university's management. That is why there was no mention of coping mechanisms by the respondents.

The suggestions to improve the pre-departure orientation were regarding health management and the dangers of the sea. It seems that the respondents want specific information on health and safety in the host country and basic sea safety procedures, especially those with activities related to the sea. The second suggestion was on local tourism or spots only known to locals. The final suggestion is about homestay arrangements if the student does not like his/ her homestay arrangements, he/she can do something about it. Most of these topics can be directed and addressed to the host school/university to tailor fit the needs of the specific program that the study abroad participants would enroll in. The pre-departure orientation may cover the topic of local tourism with the help of the host school/university. It can be observed that the suggestions cover the health, security, lifestyle, and leisure topics on a specific level that are needed during an actual study abroad experience aside from the existing topics in the current pre-orientation course offered at the university.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a profound understanding of the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure

orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students' study abroad journey in two countries. The respondents find the study abroad pre-departure orientation helpful and useful. Language barriers, transportation, and homogeneous classes were the most common challenges faced by Japanese university students. The respondents utilized various coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges they met. Disease information was among the top suggestions by the respondents to improve the study abroad pre-departure orientation. Our results offer references for teachers and policymakers in the universities in Japan to design specific pre-departure orientation to facilitate successful and well-equipped study abroad participants.

### 5.1 Study Limitation

This study is one of its kind to investigate the efficacy of study abroad pre-departure orientation by investigating the experiences of Japanese university students in two countries. First, the respondents were recruited from two universities, and their experiences may not be generalized to other study-abroad participants of other nationalities, considering the high-context culture of the Japanese. Second, the research environment was in Australia and the Philippines. The experiences of the students in these countries may differ from other countries in general. Third, there was a small sample size, due to time constraints and not so many students from the chosen universities participating in study abroad programs, which might cause information bias. However, holding a philosophical foundation of phenomenology that highlights the "lived experiences of a certain group of people," this research could help understand the current issue from a phenomenological point of view.

### 5.2 Study Implications

Regardless of the limitations, our findings provide insights into how universities can better support students in navigating diverse cultural contexts through the pre-departure orientation for study abroad. First, this study sheds light on the perceived benefits of pre-departure orientation for study abroad, which can boost the confidence of study abroad participants before their trip. Second, it draws consideration to improvement points based on the challenges met and suggestions given by the respondents. Therefore, it provides collaboration that will bridge theory and practice. Finally, this study emphasizes the need for further scholarly investigation on pre-departure orientation for study abroad, a crucial part of the study abroad program that is neglected. Improving the pre-departure orientation will improve the cultural and academic arsenal of future participants in study abroad programs, which may lead to more participation in the future.

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## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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