

Significance of studying abroad at Japanese universities for students from 'multicultural' Australia

Hiroko Hashimoto

Australia is a multicultural country, and a large number of international students and students with various cultural backgrounds study in Australian universities. However, researchers have shown that this does not necessarily mean that local students actively interact with these non-local students.

Regarding the balance between the outgoing and incoming students, the Australian net figure shows the greatest imbalance out of the selected 25 OECD countries. Student mobility in Australia is largely one-sided. It also suggests that in Australia, international education is driven not so much by cultural as by economic incentives. Only a small number of Australian university students study abroad, and most of the outgoing students choose English-speaking countries and European countries as their destination.

This article focuses on Australian born university students from mainstream Anglo-Celtic backgrounds who study abroad in Japan for one year (in a few cases for a semester). Based on data collected from in-depth interviews, I discuss the significance of studying abroad in Japan in terms of how it has made students think about 'multicultural' Australia.

These mainstream Australian students had very limited contact with other cultures in Australia. For many of them, studying abroad in Japan, living in an international students' dormitory, and attending an exchange program with other international students was their first experience of intensive and extensive contact with diverse cultures. Two types of reactions to this environment are observed. On the one hand, some students highlight their experience of standing out because of their appearance, and feel excluded in Japanese society. They tend to dichotomise multicultural and open Australia, in which people from diverse cultures live harmoniously, versus closed Japan. They demonstrate an optimistic and idealised view of Australian multiculturalism. They do not think of how ethnic minority Australians might see Australia. On the other hand, some students enjoy the multicultural environment and try to interact with students from different cultures at their Japanese university. Through the experience they tend to question the reality of multiculturalism in Australia.