

## Japan Year Abroad Inter-University Support Programme

– Beyond University Boundaries –

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### Abstract

In 2020, a new innovative project, the Japan Year Abroad Programme Inter-University Support Programme (J-YAP IUSP), was initiated by seven year abroad coordinators from UK universities for students whose study abroad in Japan had been curtailed or cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This panel presents how what began as a simple exchange of information turned into a national-scale project that received funding from external bodies such as the Embassy of Japan in the UK. Over the two and a half years spanned by this programme, two surveys were carried out, the outcomes of which revealed challenges such as that of ensuring a sense of belonging amongst students. In this panel we will discuss 1. The development and operation of an inter-university programme – beyond university boundaries; 2. Participant feedback and 3. Reflections and future prospects. It is hoped that J-YAP IUSP will become a risk management model for future study abroad programmes.

**Keywords:** J-YAP IUSP, study abroad in Japan, virtual year abroad, students' online community, online sessions

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## 1 Introduction: Study Abroad in Japan at UK Universities

In the UK, study abroad in Japan is often incorporated into university degree programmes, especially where Japanese is part of the degree title. Students are generally sent to Japan in the second or third year of a four-year programme after having first learnt basic or beginner-level Japanese in the UK.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)'s *Subject Benchmark Statement: Languages, Cultures and Societies* (2019: 15) states that the period of residence abroad “makes a significant contribution to the development and enhancement of knowledge, understanding and skills in languages and related studies” and “encourages intercultural awareness and capability, qualities of self-reliance and other transferable skills”. It lists the following as some of the objectives for the period of residence abroad:

- provide opportunities for, and stimulate contact with, competent speakers of the target language(s)
- optimise the opportunities for linguistic progress, for the development of cultural insight and for academic and personal development resulting from extended contact with the target language environment
- enable students to reflect on and develop their own language learning skills and techniques
- develop intercultural understanding and ethical awareness
- acquire vocationally-oriented experience, where appropriate to the course.

(QAA 2019: 15–16)

Needless to say, study abroad is an important and indispensable part of the degree programme. It provides students with opportunities to consolidate the knowledge and skills gained from the year(s) preceding study abroad and further develop linguistic, cultural and social skills in an environment where Japanese is spoken in daily life. Meeting new people and handling both positive and negative experiences abroad will enrich students' life in Japan, leading to the development of communication skills and self-confidence. All of this will also help students to acquire transferrable skills, with long-term positive effects on further studies, future careers and more.

### 1.1 The Establishment of J-YAP IUSP

In February 2020, announcements from Japan of cancellations of study abroad programmes started to flood in, forcing universities to urgently devise alternative plans.

Needless to say, the loss of all of the opportunities described above due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the affected students in many ways, both pedagogically and emotionally. Some students expressed concerns about the value of their degrees without study abroad due to an inevitably lower level of achievement at the point of graduation. The initial shock and confusion caused much anxiety, and in some cases resentment, with this sometimes being followed by a loss of interest and motivation to continue studying Japanese. Such occurrences can trigger a serious longer-term problem of losing students of Japanese, as well as future researchers in Japanese Studies and other professionals to take leading roles in Japan and elsewhere. Urgent action was needed for the quality of the students' degree programmes and the protection of their future plans. It was crucial to avoid students' loss of motivation to continue studying Japanese.

In this chaotic situation, seven Japan year abroad coordinators at UK universities (Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Newcastle, Regent's and SOAS) decided in March 2020 to explore the possibility of some form of collaboration. Following numerous weekly meetings, they jointly created a programme called J-YAP IUSP

(<https://japaneseyearabroad.wixsite.com/jyap2/j-yap-inter-university-support-proj>)

to explore possible solutions to some of the issues arising from the sudden cancellation of study abroad opportunities: namely, how the group could provide a what was dubbed a 'virtual year abroad' for affected students.

J-YAP IUSP utilised an existing network created by the Japan Foundation London following the Japan Year Abroad Programme (J-YAP) Coordinator Conference in 2016 (<https://www.jpff.org.uk/news.view.php?id=424>). This event was organised after issues of support for students with disabilities were raised in a symposium entitled *Teaching and Learning Japanese at SOAS – Past, Present, Future: Celebrating 100 years of Japanese language pedagogy (and 20 of pedagogues' training)*, which was held in June, 2016. Thanks to this network, year abroad

coordinators were already communicating with one another about various issues and good practice even prior to the pandemic. However, the planning of J-YAP IUSP by some of the members of this network represented the largest and the most ambitious undertaking in the group's history. The cancellation of study abroad programmes for six months to a year eventually affected three whole cohorts of students, meaning that J-YAP IUSP continued its activities for nearly two years, supporting both students whose study abroad was curtailed and those who were unable to go to Japan whatsoever.

## 1.2 Impact of Cancellation of Study Abroad on Students and Universities

The negative impact of the loss of the opportunities as described above was extremely serious. The QAA objectives mentioned earlier looked difficult to achieve, with some students losing confidence in achieving their goals and subsequently altering their plans for the future, even changing degree programmes.

Universities found themselves in the very challenging position of having to make an urgent decision on an alternative plan to compensate for the lack of study abroad in Japan whilst also ensuring the quality of the degrees they were awarding to their students. According to QAA's *Subject Benchmark Statement: Languages, Cultures and Societies*, an alternative arrangement to residence abroad can be made via a variety of methods such as the following to achieve the above-mentioned objectives. These may include:

- directed intensive language study during vacations
- providing contact with the target language environment through digital resources and/or virtual mobility.

(QAA 2019: 16)

In reality, however, neither of the above can provide the same kind of opportunities that study abroad can offer students. For instance, during study abroad, students can study alongside their peers from other universities from around the world, as well as with students at their partner institution.

They can also learn from teachers they have never been taught by before and experience a variety of teaching styles. Within the student's own university, it is not easy to plan and offer such opportunities at short notice through courses intended to be an alternative to study abroad. As study abroad was cancelled for both outgoing and incoming students, this made it impossible to create even the bare minimum of opportunities for the two groups to meet. While these challenges were not easy to tackle, something had nevertheless to be done, and very quickly too.

### 1.3 Establishment of J-YAP IUSP

J-YAP IUSP was established to reduce the above-mentioned negative impact caused by the lack of study abroad for students on degree programmes that included study abroad in Japan. The group ran a pilot period in July 2020, during which its members offered various courses to students from the relevant universities.

J-YAP IUSP subsequently received acknowledgements from various organisations and individuals commending its vision, significance and dedication, as well as its proactive engagement in collaborative work.

From October 2020 to March 2022, the project was funded by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Embassy of Japan in the UK as an undertaking commissioned to the British Association for Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (BATJ). It also produced a list of online learning materials for Japanese upon request from the University Council of Modern Languages.

As also described in Section 2 below, J-YAP IUSP engaged in a BATJ Project (2019 Project 4: Raising Awareness of ICT Literacy for Japanese Language Teachers in the UK) to find solutions to the problems they encountered, such as GDPR and copyright issues arising from the delivery of online sessions for students from institutions other than the teachers' own. J-YAP IUSP produced a set of guidelines for teachers of Japanese in the UK, covering topics such as GDPR, copyright and support for students with specific learning differences or disabilities. This published work, *Legal Points of Consideration for Online Teaching: A Guide for Teachers of Japanese Language in the UK* is available on the BATJ website

([https://www.batj.org.uk/images/batjproject/batjproject4jyapiusp\\_final9sep21.pdf](https://www.batj.org.uk/images/batjproject/batjproject4jyapiusp_final9sep21.pdf)).

This BATJ Project also received the Japan Foundation's Sakura Network BATJ Project grant in July 2020.

#### 1.4 Sessions Offered

Since July 2020, J-YAP IUSP has run over 260 online sessions to a cumulative number of some 760 participants. The topics of these sessions were varied and included Japanese language, culture, Japanese Studies, group discussions, language exchange and career talks by graduates of the participating universities and employees of the British Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Table 1 below lists example sessions.

Table 1: Example Sessions

Year	Type	Session
2021	Language	Let's Speak Japanese
	Language	Practical Japanese
	Language	JLPT N3 Intensive Course
	Exchange	Student-led Exchange Session with Tokyo Gakugei University
	Career talk	Pursuing Life & Work in Japan: Grasping Opportunities both in Japan & Overseas
2020 (Oct-Dec)	Language	Shaberiba (Talk Room) Language Exchange
	Exchange	Language Exchange with Japanese University Students
	Language	Japanese Vocab & Expressions
	Lecture	Introduction to Japanese Linguistics
	Language & Culture	Explore the World of Ee-kanji, English-Kanji!
	Japanese Studies	Noh Drama Workshops

Pilot (Jul 2020)	Language & Culture	<p>Double Lecture Series on Japanese Characters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impactful use of Japanese characters</li> <li>• Mystery of missing kana characters in Japanese</li> </ul> <p>Gojū-on</p>
	Language	<p>Discussion Sessions</p> <p>Online discussion with Japanese university students</p>
	Language	<p>Reading in Japanese Reading topic: Tamagotchi</p>
2020 & 2021	Events	<p>Term-end Parties and</p> <p>New Year Party</p>

As Table 1 shows, Japanese language sessions were carefully planned to ensure a good breadth of topics. Furthermore, sessions welcoming new students from October 2021 were designed based on student feedback from the previous year (see Section 3 below for more details).

The 2020 sessions included those with the aim of maintaining and improving spoken Japanese skills, as there seemed to be concerns amongst students surrounding a lack of opportunities to practise these skills given the cancellation of study abroad.

Since study abroad offers far wider opportunities than just improving language skills, often enabling students to take courses in other Japan-related subjects, J-YAP IUSP also offered sessions on culture (e.g. Tea Ceremony, Dialects, Endangered Languages in Japan) and Japanese Studies (e.g. Noh, Kabuki). This integration of language, culture and Japanese Studies enriched the JYAP-IUSP sessions and widened opportunities for students. In response to students' requests, sessions covering levels N2 and N3 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) were also added towards the end of the first year (see Section 3 below for more details).

Whilst detriment to academic achievement was a major cause of concern among students, another clear source of worry was how the lack of study abroad might affect their futures post-graduation. To address this issue and try to reduce students' fears, J-YAP IUSP contacted graduates of the universities involved, requesting support, encouragement and advice for present-day students in the form of presentations about their careers after graduation. Regardless of the university they attended,

each of these graduates had studied Japanese as part of their degree programme, participated in the study abroad programme in Japan and were pursuing careers in professions that may be of interest to the current students. Furthermore, employees of the British Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office offered talks about their work and answered various questions from students via events co-organised by Keele University, Regent's University London and J-YAP IUSP. These sessions proved to be very popular, with over 90 participants attending one particular session, and students utilising the opportunities to consider various routes open to them in the future even without study abroad, participating actively in the speaker Q&A.

Such graduate career talks and other events are normally organised at an institutional level. However, limiting the scope to one's own university will inevitably narrow students' chances to meet people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Here again, by removing the boundaries of institutions, students were able to hear warm advice and honest opinions from general graduates in Japanese rather than graduates specifically from their own university, in keeping with the vision of J-YAP IUSP.

### 1.5 Teaching Staff

In addition to the core J-YAP IUSP project members, the group was able to recruit 10 teachers via the BATJ mailing list, with funding for wages coming from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Embassy of Japan in London. These additional teaching staff included both volunteers and those paid with the aforementioned funding, and included individuals with a diverse range of backgrounds and experience. It was expected that this would help the students to learn from teachers with a variety of teaching styles and ideas for learning materials, thus fulfilling one of the benefits of study abroad that we sought to recreate through the programme.

The topics offered by teachers in their sessions were also varied, covering content such as a virtual take on student life at a Japanese university, conversation practice and student-led exchange with a Japanese university. For Japanese Studies sessions, members of the British Association for Japanese Studies provided lectures on topics such as Noh and Kabuki. A Japanese lecturer at a UK university also offered a session on tea ceremony.

Having described the background to the establishment of J-YAP IUSP and its vision, aims and content, let us now turn to the following three topics in relation to the delivery of J-YAP IUSP: 1) The challenges it faced, such as GDPR issues; 2) Feedback from students and teachers and 3) Possible future development and longer-term roles of J-YAP IUSP.

## **2 Development and Operation of an Inter-University Programme – Beyond University Boundaries**

Since the founding of J-YAP IUSP in March 2020, regular weekly meetings were held by the project members, with occasional participation by staff from the Japan Foundation, the Embassy of Japan in the UK and a BATJ. The purpose of these meetings was to discuss how to set up a learning environment that could act as an alternative to study abroad in Japan, offering classes to the UK students whose study abroad had been cancelled due to the pandemic. Under lockdown, all classes had to be held online, which brought up multiple issues and hurdles at a time when the group had little knowledge of online teaching, particularly that crossing institutional boundaries. The most important issues to be addressed were 1) Data protection and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR); 2) Selecting appropriate online platforms; 3) Securing programme funding and 4) How best to manage student support.

### **2.1 Data Protection and GDPR**

As an inter-institutional project, J-YAP IUSP's first and most pressing issue was how to comply with GDPR. GDPR is an EU data privacy and security law rolled out in May 2018. The UK GDPR, a UK version of GDPR, was also put into effect in 2018 and is still in valid after Brexit. Educational institutions must comply with GDPR in their handling of student and staff personal data, meaning they are required to have a privacy notice (also known as a privacy policy) and to appoint a Data Protection Officer.

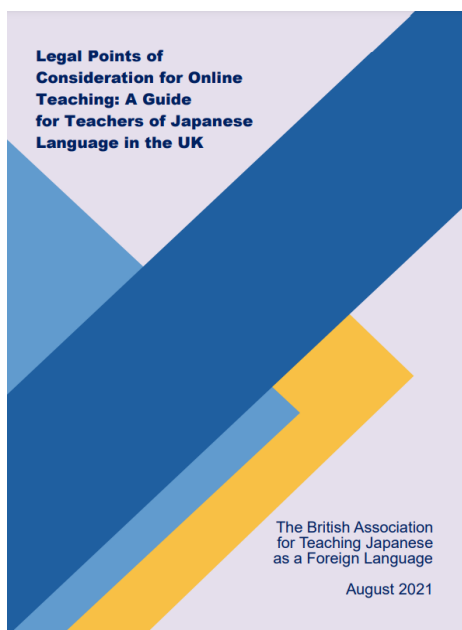
Usually, a teacher teaching their own students within their institution is covered by the institutional privacy notice. However, when students are taught by external academics from other institutions, this goes beyond the institutional privacy notice. For example, sharing contact details of one institution's

students with teachers from other institutions without students' consent is not acceptable. It is also important to ensure that any platforms, services or programmes used in online teaching are likewise GDPR compliant. Since J-YAP IUSP lessons and events were held via online services with collaboration across multiple institutions, it was necessary to have a privacy notice for the project, as well as to conduct a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) to make sure that the project was compliant with GDPR.

For J-YAP IUSP, both the creation of a privacy notice and completion of a DPIA were carried out with help from the Data Protection Office of the University of Edinburgh. As all teaching staff were forced to employ online teaching post-haste, with minimal training and support due to the pandemic, there were a great many legal matters to consider in relation to online teaching, from data protection and the risk of potential privacy breaches to issues surrounding copyright and inclusiveness. As mentioned in the introduction, the group members' findings gained through setting up and running J-YAP IUSP were used to create a set of guidelines for other teachers in a BATJ Project ([https://www.batj.org.uk/images/batjproject/batjproject4jyapiusp\\_final9sep21.pdf](https://www.batj.org.uk/images/batjproject/batjproject4jyapiusp_final9sep21.pdf)).

Image 1: Cover Page of *Legal Points of Consideration for Online Teaching: A Guide for Teachers of Japanese*

*Language in the UK*



One of the GDPR-related issues the programme faced while offering online sessions was how IUSP teachers could contact students directly without compromising personal data security. For example, situations arose in which teachers needed to let students know about a last-minute class cancellation, or when they requested students' email addresses in order to share a class handout.

As an interim solution, the J-YAP IUSP Project Administrator would pass on the message if a session needed to be cancelled. When it came to sending handouts to students, it was not too difficult to obtain their consent directly, as the teacher was able to ask the participating students for their emails during class. However, these were temporary arrangements, and did not solve the problem fully. A further investigation to find a better way to handle these situations without breaching data protection is needed in future.

## 2.2 Selecting Appropriate Online Platforms

The second hurdle faced by J-YAP IUSP was finding a suitable platform via which to offer online sessions to students from various institutions. Although each institution uses a virtual learning environment such as Blackboard Learn, Moodle or Microsoft Teams under an institutional license, J-YAP IUSP needed to find its own platform.

First, Wix was chosen to create an online hub to provide information on upcoming sessions and study resources, as it was easy to build a website without in-depth knowledge of web development. Wix also provided essential functions for providing a secure, private space restricted to registered students and staff, with membership management features such as member-only spaces, event bookings and the option to send email newsletters. Since the website was developed by one of the project members within a short period of time, some updates were subsequently made to the structure and layout to make it more accessible and easier to navigate (<https://japaneseyearabroad.wixsite.com/jyap-iusp>).

Image 2: Website Homepage



Second, to facilitate online lessons and events, Zoom was chosen due to it being the most popular video conferencing service available. Despite the platform's popularity, there were some concerns around risks such as so-called 'Zoombombing', so Zoom meeting links were sent to only J-YAP IUSP participants. Although the Zoombombing issue was addressed soon after by Zoom itself, J-YAP IUSP introduced Google Classroom to provide an extra layer of security and to make it easier for participants to find Zoom meeting links from the second year of the programme (2021-22), from which time class Zoom links were available only within the relevant Google Classroom space.

### 2.3 Securing Programme Funding

J-YAP IUSP received funding from both the JF Sakura Network as a BATJ Project and the Embassy of Japan in the UK via BATJ. The reason for these arrangements was that J-YAP IUSP is an independent group of year abroad coordinators from the J-YAP network rather than a single registered organisation, meaning it could not receive funding directly. Following discussions, J-YAP IUSP became a specially commissioned project of BATJ. This was helped along by the fact that all of the J-YAP IUSP project members were existing BATJ members, and that J-YAP IUSP's goals could be expected to be beneficial to other BATJ members.

BATJ Project funding from the JF Sakura Network was used to cover the cost of a GDPR professional's supervision over the contents of the guidelines (the aforementioned *Legal Points of Consideration for Online Teaching: A Guide for Teachers of Japanese Language in the UK*). The outcomes of the project were not only the publication of these guidelines on the BATJ website, but also the sharing of their contents via a presentation among BATJ members at the 24th BATJ Annual Conference in 2021.

Funding from the Embassy was used to hire additional teaching and administrative staff to enhance students' learning experiences. Although problems caused by the cancellation of study abroad in Japan were universal, participants were limited to students at UK institutions due to the fact that the Embassy of Japan in the UK could not offer support to those outside the UK. If J-YAP IUSP were to expand to other countries, or another similar initiative were set up elsewhere outside the UK, careful consideration of the associated boundaries and limitations would be necessary.

The Embassy of Japan in the UK gave J-YAP IUSP not only funding but also a video message from the Ambassador encouraging students to keep studying Japanese even their study abroad was cancelled. This video is still available on the J-YAP IUSP website (<https://japaneseyearabroad.wixsite.com/jyap-iusp>).

Image 3: Screenshots of the YouTube Video Message from Ambassador Nagamine Yasumasa



A message from Ambassador Nagamine Yasumasa to students in the UK

whose study abroad has been cancelled or curtailed.



#### 2.4 How Best to Manage Student Support.

Another area that was key to consider when arranging classes and events was how to provide a variety of sessions at different timings. Participating students were from various UK institutions with differing timetables, academic calendars and language levels. In addition, scheduling had to take into account international students, who may also be in other time zones. As such, J-YAP IUSP classes and events were offered at various times of day, with some classes taking place in the morning, some in the afternoon and others in the evening (according to UK time) so that a wide range of students could be catered to irrespective of their personal circumstances. Some classes continued to be offered even during the summer holiday period for those who would like to keep practising Japanese outside of term time. Arranging sessions during the UK daytime was particularly important, since many students taking online tuition from their host universities in Japan were suffering from the time difference with Japan, with some of their online classes from Japanese universities being held at midnight in the UK.

Participation in J-YAP IUSP was optional for students at most of the participating universities, although a few Japanese departments did make J-YAP IUSP classes part of their substitute arrangements for the cancelled year abroad. To encourage students to participate in more J-YAP

IUSP sessions, a pick-and-mix approach was introduced, allowing students to book whichever session(s) they would like. Although this arrangement gave participants plenty of flexibility, it may also have caused a lack of regular attendance.

## 2.5 Summary

From the beginning of announcements of study abroad programmes being cancelled from March 2020, year abroad coordinators had only three months to set up the J-YAP IUSP initiative. However, this haste was necessary to start supporting the affected students as soon as possible in such a time of emergency. Although some of the issues mentioned above were predicted while setting up the project with bare minimum preparation time, there were also many new, unforeseeable issues and challenges encountered along the way while J-YAP IUSP classes and events were already being held. If J-YAP IUSP is to expand to EU countries and beyond as a collaborative project, or should a new initiative be founded in another country, it is important that these issues be addressed.

In the following section, we will cover student and staff voices, evaluating the project's success and exploring areas to be improved for future development.

## 3 Reflections on J-YAP IUSP: Feedback from Participants

### 3.1 Students' Feedback

In order to evaluate student satisfaction surrounding J-YAP IUSP, online questionnaires were distributed to participants at the end of the first year as well as the second year of J-YAP IUSP, with research ethical approval obtained prior to data collection. Out of 25 students who responded anonymously to the first survey in March 2021, 18 had participated in more than one session offered by J-YAP IUSP. As shown in Table 2, the majority of these 18 students gave positive feedback on their experience. This can be summarised as follows:

- First, all 18 students responded positively regarding the variety of sessions provided.
- Second, the majority agreed that the sessions helped them to maintain motivation and to improve their Japanese while also deepening their understanding of Japan.
- Finally, more than 70% of the students felt that the programme supported them and gave them a

sense of belonging, although there were a few who did not agree with this statement.

Table 2: Student Feedback (n=18)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The sessions were varied and interesting.	10	8	0	0	0
The programme helped motivate me to keep studying Japanese.	9	6	3	0	0
The sessions have helped me to improve my Japanese language skills and develop my understanding of Japan.	9	7	2	0	0
I was supported by and felt the sense of community working with peers and teachers from various universities.	5	8	3	2	0

The following comments from the students suggest that those surveyed recognised the benefit of taking part in J-YAP IUSP in terms of having the opportunity to learn Japanese from new teachers and to study with students from other universities:

“I thought it was great meeting other people in the UK who also study Japanese.”

“I think it was a good thing. Talking in Japanese with new people, not just my classmates, helped me in overcoming my shyness when speaking the language.”

“I enjoyed it. It was an interesting way to meet new people and to learn about other programmes and see new perspectives.”

“It gives me the feeling that I am part of a community where everyone has the same interest in learning the Japanese language and culture.”

“I found it fun to be able to engage with students from other universities although it of course couldn't compare to being able to meet and study together in person. Thank you to the teachers for trying their best to give us the connections that we would have otherwise made abroad.”

Under normal circumstances, students would have been able to have such experiences in person during placement in Japan. These results indicate that J-YAP IUSP was able to achieve its main purpose, which was to serve as a portal connecting students who, despite coming from different universities, were unfortunately bound by the same fate caused by the pandemic.

In contrast, the following students' comments suggest that providing a learning portal does not necessarily translate into the opportunity to make friends:

“I think it is hard meeting new people for the first time in online classes anyway, not due to the programme.”

“I wished there were more ways in connecting with peers from other universities with more freedom being able to talk to others (as it can often feel awkward being in class with other students without properly talking to them).”

“I wish there were more social events that facilitated conversation and meeting new people. A lot of the socials involved playing games and then ending before you can make any friends.”

“It was kind of awkward and I found it hard to reach out and continue friendships after a session.”

“Because they were from different universities, they were effectively strangers to me. The only thing we had in common was a cancelled year abroad and a desire to study Japanese, so we would be able to work together, but not become close.”

These comments imply that further support is required to build rapport amongst students and make them feel part of the J-YAP IUSP community, which is by necessity an online environment.

Prior to starting the second full year of J-YAP IUSP in Sep 2021, the programme was revised after examining the following five issues raised by students.

First, more grammar sessions were requested as well as exercises and worksheets. Although a study by Fujino (2021) suggests that grammar lessons are valued by the students who are studying Japanese for their degree programme, this comment was unexpected as we had thought that students would ask for more opportunities to practise their speaking skills or for more sessions about Japanese culture that they would miss out on due to the cancellation of their study placement in Japan. Indeed, nurturing cultural awareness is also one of the key purposes included in the Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, Cultures and Societies (QAA 2019, p.15). To meet students' needs, the J-YAP IUSP members included more grammar sessions in the second round. However, as for worksheets and exercises, no request was made to teachers, as they had commented that they were reluctant to give homework due to the number of students who did not attend consistently from week to week.

Second, there was a request to run more classes aimed at preparing for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). JLPT classes were added towards the end of the first year to see if there was demand. As demand was indeed evident, these were included in the programme from the start of the second year.

Third, students made comments regarding the J-YAP IUSP website, citing difficulty in site navigation and confusion over the titles of the various language sessions. This can partly be attributed to the website being created not professionally, but rather by one of the J-YAP IUSP founding members, with follow-up support from the Project Administrator, as the group had neither the time nor funds to outsource an experienced developer. As such, these two project members continued to improve on the website throughout the year, and following this feedback made further changes to make it more user friendly by adding additional English explanations and more.

Fourth, lack of clarity surrounding the class schedule was highlighted by some students. The J-YAP IUSP timetable was devised carefully to give as many students as possible the opportunity to take part in the online courses on offer, with classes and events provided on a variety of different days and times. However, the survey results revealed that students found such an inconsistent

schedule difficult to follow. Therefore, the group began to email the schedule for the following week to those who were registered with the J-YAP IUSP website every Friday.

Finally, students asked for opportunities to interact informally with other students, including students from Japanese universities. Due to the nature of the programme, which had no attendance requirement, members of any given class changed frequently, making it difficult to build friendships even in spite of teachers eliciting self-introductions from new students joining their classes. One student also commented that it was hard to interact with other students informally during the class and to develop a friendship beyond class time. To create a more informal environment for students to converse with one another, J-YAP IUSP offered language exchange sessions with a Japanese university.

By the time data from the second survey was collected in April 2022, the majority of students had been able to go to Japan, with only six students responding to calls for feedback. The survey result from the second round presented the timetabling issue that had also been evident in the previous survey result as well as the following issues:

- Students asked about how to contact other students as well as their teacher, especially when they had a question. This comment made it clear that basic communication between students and teachers – or even amongst students themselves – had been challenging due to the online format of the programme with strict adherence to GDPR.
- There were no more negative comments about the website. However, students asked about how to access PowerPoints and other materials used in class, as well as recordings of sessions. They also commented on some teachers' lack of knowledge and skills to use Zoom and the effects this had had on lessons.
- There was a query about the future availability of J-YAP IUSP, as all Japanese language classes had concluded by the end of March 2022.

### 3.2 Teacher Feedback

Feedback from the teachers who taught courses for the programme also varied. For example, some were able to gain some experience to support them in changing careers in the future, such as shifting

sectors from secondary to higher education, while others took advantage of this opportunity to return from parental leave. Many also mentioned that they were able to gain experience in teaching online and in carrying out experimental activities in a creative manner. As in some institutions syllabi are strictly controlled and teachers may not have the time or space to examine new and creative ideas, J-YAP IUSP appeared to provide a somewhat rare opportunity for a number of teachers.

When J-YAP IUSP was founded in the summer of 2020, it was also the intention of the project members to give BATJ members the opportunity to gain teaching experience in a different context from that which they had experienced to date. Teacher feedback suggests that this aim has been achieved.

#### **4 Conclusions**

To overcome the unprecedented long-term crisis surrounding study abroad programmes in Japan fuelled by the Covid-19 pandemic, J-YAP IUSP endeavoured to fill the gap faced by students who had lost their opportunity to study in Japan. This gap was not limited to academic opportunities to study Japanese language, cultures and Japan-related subjects, but extended also to developments on an intercultural and interpersonal level.

As described in some detail above, J-YAP IUSP's ambitious initiative faced a number of challenges and problems. For instance, the very act of teaching students from various universities across the UK immediately triggered concerns surrounding GDPR and related issues. Furthermore, difficulties arising from online teaching, such as creating rapport in online classrooms – an issue already well-known at individual universities – were directly inherited by J-YAP IUSP.

Nothing – including J-YAP IUSP – can replace the valuable experience of study abroad. However, under such challenging circumstances, one can only do that which is possible. Although the programme's ability to support students may have been limited, it is the sincere hope of the project members that in 10 years' time, when students reflect on the current pandemic that forced them to graduate without experiencing study abroad, they will feel that they were able to do something unique by making the best of what J-YAP IUSP was able to offer. This in turn may potentially help such students to gain some confidence in what they decide to do in future, especially when they face further challenges in life.

It is notable at this juncture that on one hand, some J-YAP IUSP participants pulled themselves together and found a different way of going to Japan, possibly for longer than they would have been able to via study abroad, such as the JET Programme, other Japan-related careers, postgraduate studies and so on. On the other hand, however, some students were so shocked and discouraged by the cancellation of their study abroad that they lost the drive to start something new. Whilst this is a natural initial reaction, these students will at some point need to stand up and carry on. It is hoped that J-YAP IUSP was able to help them to maintain their motivation to continue studying Japanese and seek further opportunities despite the unfortunate cancellation of their study abroad.

The potential roles of J-YAP IUSP are likely to change over time depending on the evolving circumstances our students and teachers find themselves in. The last J-YAP IUSP session was held in spring 2022, offering practical tips on arrival in Japan for students who were about to travel to the country once the borders reopened. Currently, whilst uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic continues, study abroad in Japan has resumed, and students are able to join exchange programmes at long last. However, those students who were unable to go to Japan over the past few years will have no choice but to continue to live with the fact that they had to graduate without study abroad. Thus, there are at least three main potential roles of J-YAP IUSP that may be envisioned moving forward:

- First, it can offer continued support for these students where possible by continuing to keep events and other opportunities open to them.
- Second, events such as career talks will continue to be organised, with further possibilities being explored.
- Third, J-YAP IUSP has the potential to function as a platform for teachers from different backgrounds to share teaching and other ideas.

By flexibly fulfilling various roles such as the above, it is our hope that J-YAP IUSP will expand its scope and be able to contribute to the community of Japanese language teachers as well as Japan study abroad coordinators.

Since we now have available to us this established virtual study abroad programme, we are better equipped for future cancellations of study abroad due to incidents such as natural disasters. While this time, participation in this initiative was limited to the UK and to some extent Japan, J-YAP IUSP also has the

potential to become one model that can be developed in other parts of the world and for other languages too.

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