

The global reach of internships: Experiencing the Disney Academic Exchange Internship Program

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Abstract

In response to contemporary employment conditions, and as means to be more internationally competitive, Japanese university students are looking for new ways to learn practical work-related skills while developing foreign language literacy. Taking part in an internship abroad is one experience that can ensure these two complementary needs are met. The *Disney International College Program* is one such internship program that incorporates an extended period of employment at Disney World, Florida with the study of hospitality and tourism management through Disney's accredited university system. At present the program attracts 8000 participants from around the world including around 100 students from 8 Japanese tertiary education institutes. After examining internships and their evolution, this paper considers the *Disney International College Program* and the way in which students from one Japanese university prepare for, and experience it. By assessing the personal experiences of participants through interviews carried out upon their return to Japan, the merits and challenges of this international internship is made.

Key words: internship, Disney, education, employment alliance, overseas sojourn, professional experience, employability

1. Internships

Across a range of academic disciplines the word 'internship' has recently become both ubiquitous and pervasive. Not only do university bulletin boards entice students to internship positions in Japan and further afield, but teachers are also aware of the importance for students to take part in an internship to improve employability and to put knowledge learned in the classroom into actual practice. In this sense, internships unlike summer jobs, seasonal or temping positions before them, provide students with a "familiarity with professional practice" (Busby & Gibson, 2010, p. 11) by enhancing knowledge in students' vocations. Internship participation also builds awareness of other people and assists in understanding the importance of informal learning (Tennant & McMullen, 2009).

Furthermore, as Taylor (2012) shows, internships can have significance to students' future lives in terms of employment, life skills and global understanding. It is thus of little surprise that internship has become a buzzword for those involved in tourism and hospitality education (Takahashi, 2008).

Although it has become a part of being young, the internship "explosion" (Perlin, 2012) is not without its critics. Internships have been labelled as economically 'exploitive' and seen as promoting a blurring of the lines between full time and part-time employees. These arguments notwithstanding, internships have nevertheless developed a strong international dimension as students seek to broaden their horizons and gain skills needed in the global economy. One such international internship is offered by the Walt Disney Corporation and is one of the world's largest internship programs attracting more than 2000 international student interns from all over the world each year. From ticket counter to character performer, student interns at Walt Disney World, Florida provide vital services that keep Disney's network of theme parks operating; indeed some claim the entertainment behemoth would cease to exist without its student employees (Jones, 2010).

How has the internship evolved to become a powerful force linking education and industry? How does the internship at Disney World fit into this evolution? The aim of this paper is to examine these questions through the eyes of Japanese students who have experienced the 6-month Disney International College Program internship. In doing so it hoped that anecdotal ideas that internships 'improve' students' CVs or 'raise employability' can be made more authentic and substantial.

1.1 The Evolution of Internships and International Internships

Although sometimes still poorly understood, the terms, 'internship' and 'intern', have existed for more than 150 years. The first use of the term intern (or 'intern') has been traced back to 1865 when it was used exclusively to describe physicians who had not yet become fully qualified (Perlin, 2012). Following this, 'internship' and 'intern' were formally standardized by the American Medical Association in 1905 and in doing so hospitals were put in charge of newly graduated but inexperienced medical 'students.' This set the "axiomatic" (Busby & Gibson, 2010, p. 6) precedent for the modern day relationship between the providers of internships (i.e. industry) and the providers of interns (i.e. the education institutes) with the latter tending to take a somewhat subservient role (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

After becoming formalized by the medical profession, internships were adopted by U.S. public administration in the 1930s and enjoyed great popularity during Washington DC's expansion after World War II. The growth of liberal thinking in the 1960s and 1970s also boosted the internship model as the idea of donating services to society rather than asking for remuneration became common. By the 1980s, and on the back of new academic disciplines (including tourism and hospitality) and new information technologies rapidly changing skill requirements, 'management training' internships emerged (Perlin, 2012). It is in this time that the Disney World internship has its roots, a time when industry demanded not only a wide range of skills from new employees but also that these employees be 'contingent' and thus able to respond to changes in demand.

Since the year 2000, the internship has expanded beyond national borders to become an international phenomenon (Busby & Gibson, 2010). Perlin (2012) points to a doubling of participation by Americans in overseas internships from 7,000 to 14,000 between 2000 and 2008, and these figures are reflected in the growth of the Disney International College Program (DICP). With just one overseas university partner in 2004, from which 100 Mexican student interns travelled to Florida, the DICP now embraces more than 200 overseas university partners that send more than 2000 student interns annually (Arledge, Lucas & Miles, 2005). This exponential growth has been fuelled not only by a desire among universities to develop industry ties, but also by the emergence of "higher vocational education" (Billet, 2008, p. 41) which promotes a smoothing of the transition between tertiary education and industry for both students and employers. International internships such as the DICP have also benefited from the recent global expansion in the international mobility of students. This is particularly so for students of tourism and hospitality (Takahashi, 2002) where an inherent language or cross-cultural component prevails.

International internships are now being sought and promoted by globally minded students (Taylor, 2012) and companies in Japan, as well as around the world (Chunichi, 2011; Nakamura, 2008). The form and style of internship thus varies from place to place according to societal norms, cultural values, or governmental regulations. Even so, and notwithstanding the considerable differences in definition to its medical predecessor, it seems true to suggest that internships have become a "global fact of life" (Perlin, 2012, p. 186). The Walt Disney Corporation, is one company that has adopted this idea and turned the internship model into a global phenomenon.

1.2 The Disney Internship and the International College Program

From its beginnings in the summer of 1980, the Disney College Program (DCP) of which the DICP is one branch has grown into one of the largest single company international internship programs in the world. Based on evidence of DCP participants from Mexico (Arledge et al., 2005), the United States (Perlin, 2012) and Japan (Chunichi, 2012) it is one of the most sought after internships for students entering the hospitality and tourism management industry. The DCP currently invites in excess of 8000 students to “take classes and earn academic credit...through [a] combination of academic and career training, learning from top colleges in the United States, while working in a world-renowned entertainment company” (Disney, 2013). Despite the challenges (Arledge et al., 2005) of establishing credit transfer mechanisms between American and overseas partner universities and Disney, and claims that the academic component is “dubious” (Perlin, 2012, p. 7), it has been hugely successful in attracting students to universities with program links to Disney and in promoting internships globally (Chunichi, 2012).

The current strategic structure of the Disney College Program internship is not reflected in its more *ad hoc* origins. The idea of hosting interns and a structured internship program at Disney World, Florida began through a combination of need and good fortune. In 1978 as Disney World expanded its Florida operations with the opening of the EPCOT theme park, there was a need to find contingent (i.e. seasonal) labour to staff the new facility (the local labour market was too small). By chance, hotel management students from a New York college had for several years been undertaking work experience (rather than internship) at Disney World while being taught by their own instructors, and as other U.S. universities adopted a similar learning/working model with Disney, the entertainments giant saw an opportunity to institutionalize the arrangements into the “Disney College Program” (Perlin, 2012).

Under the terms of this arrangement, it was agreed that students would work (for payment) and study at Disney World, and credits would be transferable to home universities. With universities keen to develop industry-education partnerships and to diversify student recruitment policies, the resultant tripartite alliances were win-win for students, universities and Disney itself. Such alliances have been described as being of “strategic” importance (Busby & Gibson, 2010, p. 7) to Disney, U.S. accredited universities and institutes outside the United States and given the huge interest in the program, these alliances have proved to be not only strategic but also highly profitable.

1.3 Disney College Program and the Disney International Program

Today, the DCP has two main branches: the Disney College Program (for students from the United States); and, the Disney International College Program (for those from abroad). The latter, begun in 2000 between Disney, the University of Greensboro (North Carolina) and Tec De Monterrey (Mexico), is further subdivided into three programs: the “Cultural Representative Program”; the “J-1 Cultural Exchange Program” and, the “Academic Exchange Program” (Disney, 2013).

Despite there being three separate elements to the international programs, there is much overlap between each one. For example, living arrangements, pay rates and hours, and regulations concerning English language ability, conduct and personal appearance vary little between the three programs (Disney, 2013). Where differences do exist are in the balance of work and study during interns’ stays. The J-1 Cultural Exchange Program (JCE) for example is a summer work program at the Disney parks with limited academic focus, while the Culture Representative Program (CRP) provides a longer experience that enables students to act as cultural knowledge experts for Disney Parks’ visitors. The Academic Exchange Program (AEP) on the other hand is a fixed 5-month sojourn, with a strong emphasis on education in which students work at one of the Disney Parks while studying towards a diploma in tourism and hospitality management. The focus of this paper is on the AEP; readers are directed to Doherty (2006), Jones (2006), and Perlin (2012) for details of both the JCE and CRP.

2. The Disney Academic Exchange Program and Japanese Universities

The first Japanese tertiary level education institute to send students to the Disney Academic Exchange Program (AEP) internship took place in 2009. Presently, although some initial participating universities have ceased their agreements with Disney, based on publically available information of individual participating universities, the AEP has grown to encompass fourteen Japanese universities sending a total of around 100 students per year (see Table 1).

Program participation varies slightly from university to university, however one requirement is the existence of a United States partner which acts as a window through which credit transfer from the AEP is made to home institutes. Currently, just four US universities act in such roles (Disney, 2013). Although there is no single source of data for participant

numbers, thanks to the added value of the Disney name, each participating university in Japan highlights the AEP on their respective internet homepages (e.g. Nagoya University of Foreign Languages, 2013). This data along with the known numbers of participants is shown in Table 1. From this we can see that four universities dominate the total number of Japanese AEP participants with Meiji University (28 students in 2012) particularly prominent. Similarly, only four universities act as partners in the United States with the University of California, Riverside (UCR) an especially active supporter of the AEP.

Table 1: Japanese Universities and the Disney Academic Exchange Program

Name of Japanese University	Total EAP students (Year)	Partner Univ. in USA	Notes
Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University	0 (2012)	UC Riverside	Data confirmed by employee in charge of program.
Josai International University	2 (2013)	UC Riverside	6 participants in 2012; 8 in 2011.
KIFL, Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages	14 (2011)	UC Riverside	Includes students from KIFL's 2 and 4 year colleges.
Meiji University	28 (2012)	Florida State	A maximum of 30 students may participate.
Meiji Gakuin University	11 (2013)	UC Riverside	Highest language requirement amongst Japanese universities.
Nagoya University of Foreign Languages	15 (2013)	UC Riverside	Students take 3 months English preparation course at UCR.
Nanzan University	1 (2013)	Rollins College	Program began in AY2012.
Otemon Gakuin University	1 (2013)	Rollins College	Program began in AY2013.
Setsunan University	0 (2013)	Rollins College	Program to begin in AY2014.
Tokai University	2 (2012)	UC Riverside	Program began in AY2012.

Note

- 1: The following universities (Baiko Gakuin, Hanan, Nagoya City, and Shimonoseki City) have structural arrangements for the AEP but provide no data on participant numbers.
- 2: In addition to universities some vocational schools are known to send students on the AEP. Between 2009 and 2012, the Japan College of Foreign Languages sent four students on the AEP (Japan College of Foreign Languages, 2013).

The AEP runs twice a year as a 5 month internship, from July to January, and February to July. However, each Japanese university adds an additional period for

acclimatization to the U.S. at respective partner institutes before students arrive at Disney World. This period can be as little as 2 weeks, or be as much as 3 months (Josai International University, 2013; Nagoya University of Foreign Languages, 2013). Learning on the AEP consists of modular courses in management, seminar courses in hospitality, and courses focusing on the Disney approach to marketing, service and other areas of management. These courses are mostly delivered on-line through group assignments, AV materials, or distance learning through the U.S. partner institute. A limited number of contact hours are provided for in a more traditional classroom format at Walt Disney World. Upon graduating, a Diploma in Tourism and Hospitality Management is given to successful participants (Disney, 2013; Josai International University, 2013).

In addition to studies, employment is an integral part of the AEP. This employment, or “casting” (Disney, 2013), consists of a variety of hospitality related positions at one of Disney World’s seven theme parks and associated facilities. Students are expected to work 30-37 hours a week and are paid \$7.31-\$8.55 per hour from which deductions for accommodation and utilities at the Disney dormitory-where students are required to stay-are made. Positions include, hotel reception, concierge, merchandising, food and beverage service and even as character performers dressed as one of the well-known Disney characters.

2.1 Josai International University and the Disney AEP

Josai International University (JIU) is one of 8 universities in Japan with a fully functioning AEP internship (see Table 1). The internship was inaugurated in 2010 and the university was, thanks to its long standing sister school relationship with UCR, one of the first in Japan to send students to Florida. JIU has sent a total of 15 students in the three years since program operations began and although these numbers are modest, the program is one of the university’s flagship internships and is prominent in student recruitment and university promotional material. The internship is offered in two of the university’s eight departments (the Faculty of Tourism and the Faculty of International Exchange) and is a powerful motivating tool for JIU’s vocationally minded students. JIU students participate in the AEP from July to January with most going to Florida during their second year of studies.

2.2 Selection, Preparation and Training for the AEP at JIU

At the Faculty of Tourism, the process of selection, preparation and training for the AEP begins in the first month of JIU students’ university lives. In April two representatives from the Disney Corporation visit the university and give a PowerPoint presentation about

the Disney Corporation, the AEP, and about working and living in the United States. More than 100 students have attended these visits in each of the three years (including 20-30 from the Tourism Department). This presentation highlights the multicultural aspects of the internship and the need for strong language skills (TOEIC 600 is the minimum requirement).

A few days after the Disney representatives' presentation, students are canvassed by staff and based on students' individual motivation and the results of the university wide English language placement test, suitable candidates are accepted to join the initial stage of AEP preparation. Since Disney asks that AEP students speak "fluent English" (Disney, 2013), the initial preparation focuses on attaining a TOEIC score of 600.

During the period May-July, AEP preparation familiarizes students with the TOEIC examination, and builds test-taking skills. The examination is held on campus in May, July and October and enrolment in the TOEIC 600 equivalent Tourism English Proficiency Test level 2 (see Japan Business, and Tourism Education Organization, 2013) is held in July and October, though not required by Disney, is also recommended. Students are encouraged to read both fiction and non-fiction extensively and to develop autonomous learning strategies, as well as being active in the English Conversation Club and other cross cultural events and activities held in the department. At JIU Department of Tourism, the commitment required to achieve the necessary standard has had the effect of reducing the number of students interested in the AEP preparation considerably. In the three years since offering the chance to attend the AEP, of the approximately 30 department of tourism students attending the Disney representatives' presentation in April, only 3-5 students have continued with the preparation in late May. During the summer vacation prospective AEP students are given language tasks to ensure their language progress is continuous.

AEP preparation continues in the second semester and after the results of the October TOEIC test are announced an intra-departmental review is made and a final decision about which students to put forward for the formal Disney interview held in February or March the following year is reached. Students who are selected then enter the second stage of Disney training. This provides students with the skills, techniques and strategies required for the formal interview (held with Disney representatives), as well as academic writing skills needed during students' sojourns. Prior to the interview, students also take a Michigan English Proficiency Test (required by UCR) in January.

The interview itself has been conducted in two formats: in year one, interviews were via a Skype hook up, and in years two and three through face to face interviews in Japan. Students are interviewed alone by a panel of two or three Disney representatives. The final

decision about acceptance onto the AEP is made by Disney with no JIU input and is announced within a few days of the interview. After this, successful candidates begin making applications for visas, passports and other paperwork required by Disney whilst continuing their academic skills training on a weekly basis.

Departure to the United States is in mid-July, with students initially leaving for the U.S. host university at University California Riverside for a two week intensive language and skills program. Upon completion of this two-credit course, students depart for Disney World Florida where their 5-month internship begins. Direct return to Japan from the AEP is a condition of the visa issued for the program (no add-ons are permitted) and students return to Japan in mid-January, one or two days after finishing their academic courses and work duties.

3. The study

As a university instructor and trainer for prospective AEP students, I was interested to know about how students experience the internship, about their language development and also about any “life application” (Taylor 2012, p. 129) effects. To enable this, an informal but structured interview was developed and carried out, and a 10-item questionnaire was administered. The aim was to explore not only the experiences that students had during their sojourn, but also to assess how the AEP internship can act as a tool to motivate students and boost opportunities upon return to Japan.

Research interviews were held with the three student participants who returned to Japan from the AEP within 3 weeks of return to Japan in 2012. Interviews were of 40-60 minutes duration and were conducted in the office of the researcher. The three respondents were fully informed of the purpose of the interview and research and were willing volunteers. In addition to this formally collected data, respondents freely provided less structured accounts of their experiences in the days and weeks after the research interview and this added to understanding the AEP internship better.

3.1 The Students

The participants in the current study were three second year students (2 female and one male). With reference to Table 2, we can see that the profile of each student in terms of motivation to join the AEP, language ability (as measured by TOEIC), and impressions of the AEP. In parallel with previous works, participants in the current study included not only

those with a long term interest in Disney (Jones, 2010), but also students who wanted to achieve personal gains through the AEP. In terms of English ability, all three students had relatively modest TOEIC scores upon entry to the university but these developed well during the preparation stage and continued to consolidate as a result of the 6-month sojourn. One shared aspect between the three students was the perception that both language and learning were major hurdles during their sojourn. All students did, however, have positive impressions of the AEP overall.

Table 2: Profile of students on the Disney Academic Exchange Program

	Chika (F)	Mizue (F)	Ryota (M)
Motivation to join AEP	To get a sense of achievement while at university.	Has always loved Disney. Entered JIU because Disney internship is offered	Have always loved Disney. AEP chance to work & live in America.
TOEIC score (pbt)	Entry to university 275 Pre-departure 580 Return to Japan 590	Entry to university 465 Pre-departure 735 Return to Japan 785	Entry to university 470 Pre-departure 550 Return to Japan 640
Work at Disney	Costuming	Character: Pooh	Character: Tigger
English and Learning	Listening improved a lot but the gap between own English ability and the class was very large.	Study was very difficult but as character performer I learned how to read voice tone and facial expression well.	Had a wide circle of international friends outside work hours: gave understanding of importance of English.
Overall Impression	Satisfied, but glad to come back to Japan. Had problems with living arrangements at Disney.	Very enthusiastic: Actually lived, worked, and studied abroad; made her think what to do next in life.	Very satisfied: program acted as ‘new starting point’. Plans to use AEP experience in Japanese tourism industry.

3.2 The Experiences

The experiences of the three participants in Florida were varied and diverse. However, since the AEP internship combines work experience with learning in a social context, the research here considers students’ experiences from the three perspectives of employment, learning and friendship. In combination it was hoped these experiences would produce a clearer picture of the internship as seen through the eyes of the students themselves.

3.2.1 Employment

The experience of employment is a key element to any internship (Busby & Gibson, 2010) and when this employment is remunerated the internship becomes significantly differentiated from others. What makes the AEP even more distinctive is that this paid employment combines with formal education in an international environment at one of the world's premier tourist attractions. In this context the AEP is a significant point of departure for students from *ryugaku* and is unique for the Japanese participants. These characteristics take on even greater significance when the participants are tourism and hospitality students.

As shown in Table 2, the three respondents in the current study worked as character performers or costumers. The experiences of these two "castings" were quite different. The work of a character performer at Disney involves being dressed as a Disney character and "performing" to visitors at predetermined locations in the theme park. Each hour characters perform for 45 minutes and rest backstage (i.e. out of the view of park visitors) for 15 minutes. This cycle is repeated 7 times during one shift. One key aspect of this work is that students are not permitted to speak. As a costumer the work day consists of a more standard 7 hour shift but is largely invisible to park visitors. In both positions meal breaks are provided but the shift work pattern means students may have to start work as early as 7.a.m. or finish as late as 11.p.m..

Despite the high Florida temperatures and even though she was forbidden from speaking while "on stage" Mizue, who played the character *Pooh*, was very satisfied her work at Disney. In fact, instead of seeing her enforced silence as a disadvantage she viewed it positively. In this respect Mizue enthused:

Listening was the most important thing when I worked. I needed to guess what the visitors wanted me to do from their facial expressions or voice tone. Because of this my listening skills and understanding of body language improved quickly.

On the other hand, as a costumer Chika, who was out of view of the visitors and had little contact with them while working, was less satisfied. Her job was to fit the costumes on to the characters and other park performers which she found challenging due to an apparent hierarchy between different Disney interns:

I had to fit the costumes for all the performers, not just the characters but also the face performers who were mostly Americans. I felt the costumers were treated badly by the Americans, perhaps because of our language skill. But I definitely felt a difference between the people working behind the scenes and those who were interacting with the visitors often. I also felt it didn't help my English very much. However I believe this experience made me a stronger and better person.

In contrast, Ryota, despite initial disappointment at taking a job where he could not verbally interact with visitors, looked at the employment experience in a more holistic way. He indicated that he could learn a great deal about hospitality and how to deal with people better after working as *Tigger* for 5 months:

As Tigger I could learn that it is possible to make people happy very easily and this gave me a very positive feeling. By making the visitors happy gave me a lot of satisfaction. I want to try and use this ability in the hospitality industry in Japan.

These three examples indicate a distinct difference between hospitality positions where contact with the guest is extensive and where it is limited. Interacting with the characters such as *Pooh* or *Tigger* may be the *raison d'être* for many visits to Disney World, and in this respect Ryota and Mizue could clearly see the results of their work immediately. For backstage students such as Chika such gratification was more difficult to realize and she was required to deal with a greater range and number of other internship participants on a daily basis. Despite these differences all three students agreed with the statement '*Going on the Disney internship improved me as a person.*' This suggests that irrespective of whether the employment experience was benign or otherwise, at the time of interview students could find value in the work they did in Florida thus supporting Taylor's notion of life application in internships.

3.2.2 Study and learning

The literature on travel from Japan for an educational purpose is both rich and historically well developed (Batchelor, 1995; Bennett, Passin & McKnight, 1958; Kim, 2007), and as a genre of travel, international internship adds a further dimension to this

literature (Billet, 2009). Based on Disney literature, education is a key objective of the AEP (Disney, 2013), however how did Japanese students experience education during their sojourn?

Learning during the AEP internship focuses on the study of hospitality and hospitality management through a number of compulsory and elective modules. These are delivered through a combination of on-line courses given by staff at UCR and teacher-centered instruction at Disney itself. In 2012 the total number of direct teacher contact hours per week was fewer than five, meaning any additional hours were made up through on-demand, on-line classes and/or on-line discussion. Given that students were transferring 12 credits back to Japan, a weekly self-study load of around 20 hours could thus be expected. The three students were required to produce 5 individual reports based on reading, take part in, and report on 5 different on-line group discussions, and write 4 mini projects submitted on-line to UCR. This program of study and learning raised two key issues for students.

Firstly, and contrary to claims that Disney education lacks integrity (Jones, 2010; Perlin, 2012), all three students emphasized that learning on the AEP was very challenging. Accustomed to Japanese universities where extended reading lists and essay writing are limited to mother tongue subjects, students had to take such classes *in English*. Using the students' respective pre-departure TOEIC scores as a point of reference (see Table 2) it is perhaps not surprising that they struggled with assignments and reports. Since the three were tourism majors in Japan it might be expected that this challenging situation would have been ameliorated a little, however it does not seem to have changed the perception that the volume, and content, of learning was onerous. The second aspect raised by students was Disney's reliance on using online delivery for many of the course modules. In particular virtual discussion groups in which students were randomly placed with unfamiliar persons and asked to carry out discussion online on a specific topic were a cause for anxiety. Even Mizue, the most linguistically gifted of the three students struggled with the learning component of the AEP. Her declaration is thus representative of all three students:

It was really hard for me to understand the contents of the assignments which we needed to submit on a weekly basis. Also as the classes were on-line it was difficult to follow what people said or meant.....if I were to study abroad again I would join a normal ryugaku course, studying tourism management in English made me want to run away from learning sometimes.

In spite of difficulties with their studies during the internship, all three students agreed with the statement '*Going on the Disney program improved my knowledge of hospitality business,*' thus suggesting that the burden of the studies may have been seen as being positive in the long run. This argument notwithstanding the issue of academic integrity of the AEP was highlighted by all three students who felt the lack of supervision with writing assignments was a major flaw in the education elements of the AEP.

3.2.3 Friends

More than employment experience or knowledge acquisition, Jones (2010) suggests the main motivation for students to take part in the AEP internship is social. Indeed the Disney presentation at JIU highlights this very point to prospective students. Adelman (1998) has shown that by studying about friends during periods of sojourn we can know more about the extent of support, and Coleman (1997) shows this may have influence on language development or other difficulties sojourners may feel. In this sense friends can be a barometer for understanding overall satisfaction with an international internship like the AEP as much as the more obvious elements of employment and learning.

Based on previous social network research (Furnham & Bochner, 1982) students were asked to indicate their three best friends during their internship at Disney World and to detail the following: (i) each friend's nationality, (ii) the circumstances of first meeting the friend, (iv) the language used with the friend, and (v) main activities enjoyed with the friend. These results are shown below in Table 3.

Table 3: Profile of the Japanese students' friends

	Friend 1	Friend 2	Friend 3
Mizue	Nationality: Canada First met: at UCR Language: English Activities: shopping, language, learning, hanging out.	Nationality: Japan First met: at UCR Language: Japanese Activities: shopping, language, learning.	Nationality: Japan First met: in Japan Language: Japanese Activities: shopping, language, learning, hanging out.
Chika	Nationality: Colombia First met: Disney roommate Language: English Activities: shopping, language, learning, hanging out.	Nationality: Taiwan First met: Disney work Language: English Activities: shopping, language, learning.	Nationality: China First met: at Disney Language: English Activities: shopping, hanging out.
Ryota	Nationality: S. Korea First met: at UCR Language: English Activities: shopping, language, sightseeing, hanging out.	Nationality: Mexico First met: Disney work Language: English Activities: hanging out.	Nationality: UK First met: at UCR Language: English Activities: hanging out, going to Disney on day off.

Note: To protect the privacy of the subjects, the names used are pseudonyms.

As shown students made friends during the internship with people from a variety of countries and through a variety of means. Copeland & Norell (2002) have suggested that to have a positive experience, sojourners should have a mixture of friends or “fund of sociability” (p. 269) that includes people from the sojourner’s home country (i.e. Japan), the host country (i.e. U.S.A), and from ‘comparable other’ countries (i.e. other Asian countries). In many respects the students here achieved such a “fund” although in Chika’s case the absence of a native English speaker friend and a Japanese friend suggests the internship experience may have lacked something for her. Ryota whose friends were from Korea (comparable other), Mexico and UK (native speaker) indicated the importance of such a fund to increase cultural learning and international exchange by emphasizing:

Since I spent a lot of time with people from different countries at both the dormitory and at work during my breaks, I could experience their language and cultures. I found that English ability is the most important thing for everything.

The result of such interactions was the perceived advancement of cultural knowledge. Indeed, all three students answered affirmatively to the statement, '*Going to Disney improved my cultural awareness.*' Thus although students may not have been learning about the host nation culture from host nationals themselves, they were able to supplement their own cultural knowledge through the lens of culturally similar others or non-American English L1 speakers.

Interestingly many best friends were formed *before* arriving in Florida with 5 of the 9 friendships forged in Japan or during the two week preparation course at UCR. This suggests that the ready-made international environment and room-share arrangements at the Disney dormitory where students stayed were not necessarily conducive for making friends (see Jones, 2010). Finally, it is noteworthy that Mizue indicated two Japanese nationals in her circle of best three friends. Although some sojourners may see this as a wasted opportunity to develop English skills or cultural knowledge, her high level of satisfaction with the internship would suggest such anecdotal ideas are questionable.

4. Comments and Conclusions

The existence of, and need for, greater scholarship in internships (Takahashi, 2002; 2008) is a direct response to the growing importance of internships to students who participate in them, and the institutes and companies that form alliances to provide them. By exploring the experiences of three students who participated in the Disney Academic Exchange Program this research, in a small way, will add to the burgeoning body of research into the internship phenomenon. Despite claims of internships being exploitive, valueless, or of lacking value, the Disney AEP as experienced by the participating student themselves seems to have real value.

Firstly, Japanese AEP students can have a true intercultural experience that would, despite the internationalization of university campuses, be difficult to replicate in Japan. Students can also it seems gain considerable experience at dealing with non-Japanese in a real working environment as both colleagues and customers. This is in sharp contrast to the more typical occasional interactions similar students might expect to have in a domestic tourism internship as occasional translators in a Japanese run hotel or other service industry facility. Students on the AEP can also gain content knowledge and language skills that can help to shape their future or that they can adapt to their futures.

Although building friendships, working alongside culturally different others and studying in new ways may have its hardships, the idea that internships can create something new was a recurrent narrative voiced by the three students of the current research. Ryota, for example, highlighted this by saying his confidence to speak English had soared from “40% before departure to America to 75% since returning to Japan” as a direct result of the Disney AEP. He still remains one of the few students to habitually use English at university both in and out of class. In this sense he claimed that the experience was a new beginning for him. For Mizue the AEP made her realize again the importance of English around the world and that it is not simply a tool for communication but a way to expand one’s own horizons. Even for Chika, whose experience was perhaps the least positive of the three, the multicultural environment was highly attractive in that she found for the first time there are nationalities other than those that are native speakers of English. Consequently the time abroad had encouraged her to start questioning the accepted ways of doing things in Japan and she now makes an effort to express her own opinion more often. In these respects the AEP is much more than 12 transferable credits or an additional 100 TOEIC points: it is an eye-opening experience for Japanese students.

Despite students mostly benign impressions of the AEP, some of its widely believed weaknesses such as being academically unchallenging (Jones, 2010; Perlin, 2012) seem to have been confirmed in the course of this research. Although the contents of the academic courses were not clear from the research interviews it does seem true to say that Japanese students are ambivalent at best towards instruction carried out mostly by on-line means. Moreover my conclusion after speaking with each student was that courses were arranged in a chaotic manner with little consideration given to the cultural sensibilities of the students themselves. All three respondents hinted at a formal learning environment that emphasized convenience for teaching and staff and thus compromised academic integrity.

Institutes such as Josai International University that send students to Disney may need to recalibrate their training and preparation regimes to suit this style of instruction but at the same time it would be helpful if Disney were to be more forthcoming with examples of AEP courses in its otherwise very well presented on-line presence. In this sense the balance of power in the alliance between the Japanese university, American partner university and Disney itself is skewed towards Disney itself (see Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). With better and more equal relations between the members of the alliance Japanese institutes will be able to prepare students better leading to consequent quality improvements that would be of benefit to all involved.

Perhaps for the students themselves one of the most significant measures of the success of internship and the AEP in particular is made by an increase in students' employability. In the age of on-line employment applications students need more striking and eye catching lines of text in their résumés and the phrase "Disney International Internship" is certainly one that will afford a second glance from prospective employers in Japan where Disney is an extremely well known international brand. For students with relatively modest scholastic ability, experiential proof is a means to being more competitive, and in this sense, the experience of the Disney AEP internship can put such students ahead of those who may be more academically gifted. For each of the three students here (now in their fourth year) this has proved to be the case with each one having received full time job offers with major corporations that have—based on informal discussions—been it seems thanks in no small part to the Disney Academic Exchange internship experience.

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