

A Whole New World

A whole new world. A new fantastic point of view. For me, the experience of studying abroad was a magic carpet ride to see a new world. When I was a high school student, I went to the US as an exchange student for a year. Studying abroad in my high school days literally changed my life.

These days, due to a globalizing world, many people argue for the importance of developing global awareness. Perhaps because of this, according to the survey by the National Institution for Youth Education, 51% of high school students answered that they are interested in studying abroad. At least, a little more than half of high school students have a desire for studying abroad.

However, according to the latest survey by the Ministry of Education, the number of high school students who have actually studied abroad for more than 3 months, is just 4,076. For your information, there are 3.2 million high school students in Japan. So, the rate of high schoolers who have actually studied abroad is only 0.1%.

0.1% versus 51%. What makes this difference? Why most high school students can't study abroad, although they want to do so? Today, I'd like to discuss this current situation with studying abroad in high school, and what we can do about this problem.

Some of you may think, "Why are you talking about studying abroad 'in high school', not in university?" It is because, studying abroad in high school lead to academic

momentum for their university lives and their later lives. Let me tell you my experience. Before studying abroad, I wasn't sure what to do in the future, and I wanted to change the situation by going abroad. In a whole new world, I was able to meet a wide variety of people, such as my host sister who graduated with the highest honor from Yale University, or my friend who was fighting against discrimination towards African Americans. These encounters made me realize the importance of global perspective, diversity, and gave me the motivation to aim higher. After this experience, I decided to go to the University of Tokyo, looking toward the future of working internationally. Like this, studying abroad makes their future vision clear and broadens their competencies. Actually, Professor Martin from the University of Sydney found that students who have that kind of experiences got higher scores and much lower dropout rate in their universities than those who haven't. A whole new world contains great advantages, but now, only 0.1% students can get benefit from it.

You may also think, "I'm not a high school student. So that's not my business!" However, I'd like to say that high school students studying abroad may lead to your benefit. If we help younger generations studying abroad, then, they may grow up to be promising human resources who have the global awareness and assertiveness. As a result, their growth may make Japanese society better, and it must finally lead to our benefit!

Now, why most high schoolers can't study abroad, although they want to? There are mainly two reasons. First, the number is so small because the number is too small. This may sound weird, but actually it makes sense. Since the number of high schoolers

who study abroad is very small, most high schoolers can't imagine studying abroad in high school, and exclude it from their choices. Secondly, studying abroad costs a lot. Actually, when I decided to study abroad, it was my biggest pain in the neck. Sadly, there are very few scholarships from the government or prefectures.

Well then, what kind of action should be taken for this problem? The most effective solution is the reconsidering of current school system by Japanese government. When I was in the US, my Danish friend told me about "Gap year". In Denmark, students can take 1 year off before entering high school or university. I think Japanese school system should be more flexible like Denmark, so that high schoolers can study abroad more easily.

Then, what can "we" do to encourage our government to take action? We, adults, can break down at least a small part of barriers in the way of high schoolers studying abroad, by sharing with them the importance of studying abroad. As I explained, most students in Japan don't even see it as a choice to study abroad in high school, though they want to. The important thing is, to let them know about the choice of studying abroad in high school, whether they do so or not. For example, I serialized a monthly column in a local newspaper in Okayama prefecture for 1 year, so that I could share my experiences with many people. If you don't have the experience of studying abroad, it's OK! In that case, you can find many blogs or SNS accounts of people who have studied abroad on the Internet, and share this information with high schoolers or parents who have children. Or, you can tell them about my case!

Also, to solve the financial problems, we can introduce them to organizations which support high schoolers to study abroad. When I studied abroad, I applied to the youth exchange program run by the organization called the Rotary Club. Thanks to them, I was able to study abroad without worrying about money. Sharing information about these programs to high schoolers can be a solution. If more students try to study abroad, maybe it'll be more common, and it can change our government's policy of supporting them, like providing more scholarships. I hope that all the students will be able to expand their possibilities.

A whole new world. A dazzling place I never knew. I want more high school students to try this wonderful journey for their future, of course, after the coronavirus pandemic finishes. We can open their eyes. After their magic carpet ride, they will be the outstanding heroes like Aladdin, who can make our world shining, shimmering, splendid.