

[Article]

The Value of “Schoolings” (or “Residencies”) in Low Residency Graduate Programs: Preliminary Findings

(Nagoya Gakuin University Graduate School English Majors)

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Abstract

This paper is the second part of an on-going study exploring the significance of “schoolings” (Japanese term) or “residencies” (US term) in two low-residency distance learning graduate programs, Nagoya Gakuin’s (NGU’s) English Studies program in Japan, and the Goddard Graduate Institute’s (GGI’s) Individualized MA programs in the US. We offer the results of a survey conducted with Nagoya Gakuin students and graduates on the value of schoolings, how/if they create community through attending schoolings, and place the findings in the context of other studies on various distance learning structures. We suggest foci for further purposive study in our institutions. (Some reflections on GGI students’ perspectives are also presented.)

Keywords: Low residency/blended/hybrid distance education, community building, quality in-person interaction

通信課程とスクーリングの重要性：初期段階の学習

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Some background

In the first part of an on-going study on the importance of “schooling,” or on-campus “residencies” - the in-person portion of low-residency distance education graduate programs at Nagoya Gakuin and Goddard Graduate Institute - we raised a number of questions that seem to demand scholarly attention (McGrath & Campbell, 2016) and planned to gather data from which we might discern better means of assessing the value of our schoolings/residencies, in particular how or if a sense of shared community/culture develops and supports student learning and persistence (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Bloomberg 2008).

Distance education is often popularly understood as either correspondence courses - materials and assignments exchanged via postal services (now “snail” mail) - or totally online courses delivered via various internet platforms, sometimes including synchronous video conferencing, or seminars, or via asynchronous access to televised lectures sometimes accompanied by message boards on which students can discuss the content with each other at times convenient to them. Our form of distance education at NGU and GGI - low-residency - is now one of many variations in the amounts of student-teacher engagement furnished via some in-person meetings and combinations of computer¹ accessible technologies (possibly including video conferencing, email, etc.).

Terminology related to forms of distance education that include some face-to-face components has also proliferated. We find numerous studies on “hybrid” or “blended” education² (that is “delivered” partially online and partially face-to-face) from K-12 to graduate study but specific pedagogical approaches or types of facilitated online communication between students, etc., are rarely described in detail.

When it comes to defining blended education we find again that comparisons are confounded by the variety of understandings: in a meta-analysis of 45 empirical studies (of learners whose average age was 13-44), Means, Toyama, Murphy and Baki (2013) cite a number but themselves define education as blended when “25% or more, but not all, of the instruction on the content to be assessed occurred online” (p. 6). This rather demonstrates the difficulty of useful comparison. NGU and GGI fall into this definition of blended education but even between our schools there’s a difference in the amount of

1 In many cases, now such technologies may well be accessed by “smart phone.”

2 We use “education” rather than “learning” because many studies find no significant differences in “outcomes” but even those that measure “learning” do so via such different means that their findings seem ungeneralizable; though Means et al. state “...in recent applications, purely online learning has been equivalent to face-to-face instruction in effectiveness, and *blended approaches have been more effective than instruction offered entirely in face-to-face mode*” (p. 35; our emphasis). They then identified a further 36 studies on the No Significant Difference website of which only “10 reported a significant difference, with 9 of these differences favoring the online condition” (Note 2., p. 40). Besides, what can be described as “effectiveness” inevitably varies depending on pedagogy, at the very least.

in-person contact; and indeed Means et al. conclude “Further research and development on different blended learning models is warranted. Experimental research testing design principles for blending online and face-to-face instruction for different kinds of learners is needed” (p. 2).

The agglomerations in contemporary education that include any computer-mediated format are vast and few studies deal directly with students’ perceptions of community, culture or belonging *as relating primarily to the in-person component* of blended/low residency education; Bloomberg (2008) and Rovai & Jordan (2004) are to some extent exceptions.

Students at NGU and GGI begin their studies with an in-person schooling (NGU), or residency (GGI). NGU 1st years have a weekend orientation at the beginning of the academic year (April) at which faculty introduce the classes or seminars they are offering, and all attend a welcome party. (Students stay in hotels near to NGU’s graduate satellite and Nagoya Station.) Then in August there are four days of seminars and thesis proposal presentations, followed by another weekend schooling toward the end of the year. NGU students select classes from the graduate syllabus, email assignments via the Graduate School Coordinator to the faculty members in charge and are also assigned a thesis supervisor who works with them throughout their studies.

All GGI students attend two week-long residencies each year, usually staying on campus in Vermont³ (in February and August⁴), that include new student orientation workshops on how to use the intranet, email, library, writing lab, and construct their individual syllabus, as well as faculty, staff, student and visiting scholar workshops/seminars, graduating student presentations, commencement, daily “advising group” and individual advisor-advisee meetings in which students design their “study plan” (syllabus) for the semester. (See Appendix II for an example day in a residency schedule.) New students are assigned a faculty advisor who has eight (usually fewer) advisees in their advising group. Before each subsequent semester students contact faculty advisors to discuss their study and then submit a selection form indicating three members of faculty with whom they’d like to work. During the semester students submit five “packets” of work to their advisor via email or shared documents (usually 30–50 pages of critical papers, annotations, and other forms of documentation). GGI Director, Ruth Farmer (2017) explains: “Throughout the semester, faculty advisors and student advisees engage in written and verbal dialogues that consist of mini-lectures, questions, resources, provocations, and guidance that deepen students’ scholarship and move them toward completing degree requirements and accomplishing professional goals” (p. 30).

As noted previously (McGrath & Campbell, 2016), from our interactions and discussions with NGU and GGI students, we feel that the face-to-face components of our blended education helps students’

3 The faculty also stays on campus so we are together often over 12 hours a day. A staffed Help Desk, computer lab, lounge, and cafeteria with coffee, tea, and some snacks are open 24/7 in the community building. Security staff and a counselor are also available.

4 Part-time students attend one residency per year and earn 9 credits per semester.

learning become transformative, and Ali & Leeds (2009), reviewing literature on the benefit of in-person interaction in online courses, concur. These studies find trust and emotional support can transfer to online environments, making it harder for students to withdraw “because students feel connected to their learning community” (Ali & Leeds, 2009).

Our survey, in one sense then, was testing whether our feelings about the importance of schoolings at NGU’s Graduate School actually coincide with those of the students.

Our survey

The Student Coordinator invited Nagoya Gakuin Graduate School (NGU-GS) English Studies students and graduates to respond to an initial anonymous questionnaire intended to ascertain whether students value schooling at all, or the extent to which schoolings support their studies or give them a sense of community. Ours was an exploratory study in most regards - our sample size was relatively small with thirty-six NGU students and graduates out of ninety-one responding (fourteen 1st years and twenty-two who had studied/are studying at NGU for 2 ~ 3 years) - and we were not measuring “successful” learning (e.g. by grade, or other such “outcomes”).

We say initial because there are many acknowledged risk factors in designing a survey of peoples’ attitudes, opinions, or perceptions and we did not go through many steps to ensure the validity or reliability of the questions for the simple reason that our working students or graduates are far too busy to submit to focus groups to establish the internal/external consistency of questions (Radhakrishna, 2007). Nor did we use rating scales, in part because subjective ratings have proven problematic (Austin et al, 1998). A further consideration was cultural - various studies suggest Japanese and other East Asian peoples tend to moderate/neutralize their responses to such scales (Lee, Jones, Mineyama and Zhang, 2002; Kim & Sherman 2007)⁵. Rather, this exploration intended to bring us closer to identifying just what kinds of questions we should be asking students and ourselves. For that reason, and because the questionnaire was in English, some questions asked respondents to choose as many answers as they felt applied to them (but always left space for another answer and explanation) and many questions were open-ended.

With any questionnaire or survey format we must allow for margins of error. For instance, aside from the fact that most people probably do not have enough time to read and reflect on questions carefully, sometimes they do not actually recall why they feel the way they do; some may feel obliged,

5 E.g. A. P. Rovai’s (2002) Classroom Community Scale (CCS) has been extensively used by studies (cited by 662, according to Google Scholar) but the questions seemed likely to shut down/neutralize our non-native speakers rather than extend possible learning from respondents’ answers. See: <http://www.alfredrovai.com/classroom-community-scale/> and Rovai, A. P. (2002).

or feel that it is polite to give positive answers; some do not quite understand the point of a question⁶ and, if the questions are in a foreign language as ours was, this likelihood is increased.

Nonetheless, despite a degree of skepticism about the reliability of responses, we were pleased to find that many took the time to answer open-ended questions. These answers offered substance and allowed us to cross-reference each individual’s answers to identify when answers were consistent across questions and (we hope) therefore that they understood the meanings of questions. As it happens, individuals’ answers appeared remarkably consistent - with only two apparently contradicting themselves in responses to different questions. These appeared to be due to misinterpretation of one or other question (or, we must acknowledge, a flaw in the question design). We indicate where a respondent’s other answers modify, explain or contradict a response in the data below.

Meanwhile, GGI students/graduates had received a number of surveys on various topics last year, had been part of focus groups, and more than thirty GGI students and graduates had agreed to contribute written reflections on their experience of residencies and Goddard pedagogy to an anthology, Weil & Mirriam Goldberg. Eds. (2017). *Teaching Transformation: Progressive Education in Action*. It was not likely that many GGI students or graduates would respond to another questionnaire. GGI students have to organize their working lives carefully to attend two 8-day residencies per year, and pay for travel, food and board so we perhaps might assume that those who complete their degrees do so because they value the residencies and/or the pedagogy as there are numerous other means of gaining an MA through completely online courses, or at universities that offer local weekend residencies. A number of GGI students’ and graduates’ perspectives on residencies can be found in Weil & Mirriam Goldberg. Eds. (2017). *Teaching Transformation*.

Results of questionnaire sent to NGU English major students and graduates by the Student Coordinator

We have tried to present as full a picture of responses received and will share this with the NGU respondents and with GGI students in the hope that they will offer further insight into what aspects of in-person connections they feel it important to examine further.

All respondents were studying or had studied something related to the English language (Linguistics, English teaching, English for Specific Purposes, British or American Literature). We have distinguished 1st year responses from those who had been in the graduate school more than one year, or who had graduated because 1st year students attend a total of 8 days across their 1st year while in subsequent years, schoolings are shorter, and/or they meet their thesis supervisor privately so 1st

6 As the creators of the survey we of course acknowledge there were probably some shortcomings in terms of question structure.

year responses may be somewhat different from subsequent years' responses.

1. **The first (open-ended) question asked was *what words or phrases students would use to describe the atmosphere at schoolings*. Commonly used words respondents used to describe the atmosphere of schoolings were: supportive and friendly and all but one student commented further.**

Comments on *atmosphere of schooling* from 2nd and 3rd years/graduates (21/22 responded):

1. All the staff were supportive. The professors were willing to support their students very much. There was a good atmosphere created by students. The students could exchange their ideas and ask questions without any hesitation.
2. While I attended the schooling, I was so surprised at listening to others' English (who spoke it fluently) and their English skills. At the same time, classmates were very friendly and nice.
3. In 1st year I found that others were very busy for their study, so we exchanged contact numbers and email addresses, but few could contact after the schooling. In 2nd year, schooling times were less than 1st year, so only a few students who studied in the same main area of study became friendly.
4. I could enjoy myself but could not speak easily at schooling.
5. *No answer* [but checked all "benefits of attending schooling" below] .
6. Friendly, willing to help each other.
7. It was an opportunity to remember that I was an NGU student.
8. In my 1st year I could not speak easily and express myself in English. In my 2nd year I could make my audience laugh a lot in my mid-term [thesis proposal] presentation in Japanese. All time I was friendly and told jokes.
9. When I was 64 I entered NGU-GS for the first time in 40 years; however in the 1st year I found others friendly, open, willing to exchange information with each other regardless of our ages. In the 2nd year, besides the aforesaid, they became more friendly, encouraging and sympathetic to me, who often lost self-confidence in many of my courses and seminar. In fact schooling continued to be a place where I can find my peace of mind throughout the years.
10. It was quite motivating. Everybody seemed eager to study something new after a long break from school. It was fun getting to know my classmates, especially their career and future plans. [In response to later question notes that without schooling, the study would be "academically the same."]
11. I could meet fellows who are really enthusiastic. They motivate me to study.
12. Friendly and supportive atmosphere.
13. Friendly, independent, supportive.

14. I found others friendly and cooperative.
15. I found other students and teachers friendly, supportive and positive. [Later notes “almost no connection” outside of schooling and was happy to work independently.]
16. Although we met only a few times a year we shared a sense of solidarity. Everyone was very friendly and supportive.
17. Some subjects were challenging but teachers were all supportive.
18. I felt that I had studied with other students and enjoyed the atmosphere of studying together. It was a kind of stimulation of studying by myself. [Later, “no contact except for schooling” and “Distance learning must require schooling.”]
19. For the 1st year the atmosphere was good. I found others friendly, open, and supportive. The professors were supportive and offered a lot of resources, For the 2nd year the atmosphere was better. However, there were fewer classes to attend. I wish I could have had more time to interact with fellow students.
20. 1st year was fruitful. It was time to seek for the right theme of the thesis. 2nd year was just too busy for doing everything, my own job, homework and thesis.
21. “Efficient” (we can concentrate on our study because the school and teachers give full consideration to us: full-time workers, every time). [However, had no contact with peers outside of schooling.]
22. I was nervous at the beginning but soon relaxed because of friendly students and teachers. 2nd year while I was studying at home I felt lonely so was all the more happy to see classmates and teachers again. When it was over I was relieved and happy that I had done my best and had friends to share the joy. I felt the same at the graduation ceremony.

1st year comments on *the atmosphere at schoolings* (14/14 responded):

1. The summer time schooling was splendid, in a word. The lectures were active & interesting to me [and] in a harmonious atmosphere. The mid-term presentations especially attracted me very much for the high qualities of the presentations and the assiduity of each presenter. Thank you very much for giving me an opportunity [to join] such a useful event.
2. I found other students enthusiastic, friendly, and energetic. I also found I am behind the other students in all assignments and tasks. They helped me a lot.
3. I imag [in] ed that it wasn’t hard to become “classmates” or “schoolmates” because we were adults students. We always encourage each other to study and are really good schoolmates. We often share experiences of teaching. I asked one of my coworkers studying at another graduate school. The atmosphere at his schooling is totally different from ours. I believe it is the best choice to study at NGU.
4. The course work and assignments are very stimulating and I am happy to be exposed to such

an academic atmosphere. Meeting and exchanging with students from all over Japan is very interesting. [Later notes “I can work by myself communicating with the teachers and advisors.”]

5. I felt comfortable to share my ideas and to ask questions most of the time. Some students were very supportive and willing to share, while others seem reluctant to speak up.
 6. I could listen to many opinions of other excellent students, increasing my motivation. [Later says, “I talked to my fellow students during schoolings only.”]
 7. The atmosphere was so nice because we could meet and talk about the assignments and so on. Everybody spent an efficient time.
 8. I found good friends who can encourage each other which is very important for me to continue my study so this summer schooling is very helpful.
 9. Professors are very supportive, giving me valuable and applicable information. Teachers’ feedbacks I receive after submitting reports are always very informative, which makes me feel motivated. And the textbooks I am offered include a variety of fields such as semantic analysis, discourse analysis, and literatures, so I’ve never got tired of learning.
 10. The atmosphere at my schooling is hard for me but it’s fun to interact with graduate students and professors.
 11. I was so excited that I could communicate with others. I enjoyed to discuss and it was very interesting.
 12. I found others friendly and kind.
 13. I found others supportive. Meeting and communicating with faculty and other graduate students inspired me to study English Education more. [Does not keep in touch with peers outside of schooling.]
 14. It was a good opportunity to share information. I enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere.
11. **Asked about *the benefits of schooling***, 31 appeared to value receiving advice or resources from other students and faculty, 30 valued meeting peers and learning about their areas of study, and 26 appreciated meeting faculty and learning about their areas of study.

Further comments on *benefits of schooling* from 2nd~3rd years/graduates (4/22 responded; no 1st years commented further):

- It is worth attending schoolings. You can meet and talk to highly motivated students who will be eager to acquire master degrees.
- I could see the classmates who were of different ages and I was able to learn a lot of unique thoughts through English.
- Because I live in Sapporo, my professor gave me some lectures through Skype. Of course that should be a great tool but ... [unfinished]

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(Asked to check as many answers as apply)	1st yrs (14)	2 + yrs (22)	All 36
Meeting other graduate students and learning about their areas of study	12	18	30
Being able to exchange resources/advice with other graduate students	13	18	31
Meeting members of faculty and learning about their areas of study	11	15	26
Receiving advice and/or resources from members of faculty or students	14	17	31
Being able to set aside professional work and/or family obligations and focus only on my graduate studies, even for a short time	5	14	19
Taking part in schooling relieves my feelings of isolation	7	15	22
Schooling makes me feel part of a scholarly community	10	12	22

- It was very motivating and inspiring to see people working harder than me.

III. We were also interested in identifying *the extent to which students kept in touch after schoolings*. This was an open-ended question.

2nd~3rd years'/graduates' responses (all 22 answered - * 5 do not keep in touch with peers):

1. I exchanged email with some students while I was at NGU. Unfortunately I have not contacted them recently since I've been busy with my job. I will try to contact them this year.
2. We occasionally exchange emails.
3. I exchanged contact numbers and email addresses with many students in the 1st year but contacted only a few by email.
4. * I do not keep in touch with fellow students I met at schooling at all. [This person admitted that though enjoyable “I could not speak easily at schooling.”]
5. I contacted my classmates using LINE [free, private, instant messaging app⁷] . We made our class's group there.
6. We are connected through LINE and Facebook.
7. After graduating I kept in touch with one of my fellow classmates using email. As his name appears in an English Teachers' magazine every month, I sometimes send him an email referring to it.

7 Launched in 2011 in response to telephone and wireless chaos after the 3/11 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, now used by perhaps 40% of the Japanese population.

8. I just emailed my fellow students about studying and everyday life.
9. I kept in touch most with a fellow seminar student but exchanged emails with 3 others. Regrettably as I work as a vocational teacher I don't have much free time to enjoy as much communication as I wish.
10. Right now finishing my thesis is a priority rather than socializing but I'd like to contact some of them after completing my research project.
11. I sometimes email fellow students.
12. I meet them a few times a year. We update our status (including jobs), stimulate and encourage each other.
13. * Almost no connection. [Also said doing presentations, and learning in "actual classes ... [were] important to me."]
14. We sometimes email each other to exchange information.
15. I keep in touch with some students and meet them a few times a year.
16. I emailed a few students who were close to me now and then, and quite a few times one of the students who studied under the same supervisor.
17. * Unfortunately I don't keep in touch with other students I met at schoolings. [But also said that without schooling "I would have benefited less because no schooling means no face-to-face communication with teachers or with other students."]
18. * I haven't made contact except for schooling. [Also said, "I ... enjoyed the atmosphere of studying together. It was a kind of stimulation of studying by myself."]
19. I kept in touch with fellow students via email a few times a month. We exchanged ideas on assignments and our own research projects, and encouraged each other to complete our work.
20. Email, sms, and calls.
21. * None.
22. I keep in touch with [a professor's] seminar group. We gather a few times a year and talk about jobs and study. Some others send emails sometimes and let me know how they are. When I need help or information I sometimes email them and ask for help (and vice versa). When a classmate from far away has a chance to visit they let me know and I meet them.

1st year responses on *keeping in touch after schoolings* (all 14 answered - 3 do not maintain contact outside of schooling):

1. My main purpose [in attending] summer school was to make (further) acquaintance with fellow students, that is, my classmates - I think it was well achieved this time.
2. I keep in touch with some fellow students. We talk, teach or exchange information using LINE.
3. We know each other's email address and keep in touch very often. Unfortunately we can't meet except for schooling because we live far apart.

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4. I don't usually contact other students except for my seminar mates.
5. I communicate with some members via LINE and it's been helpful for staying motivated and for exchanging information/ideas.
6. * I talked to fellow students during the schoolings only. [Also said that without schooling “I will give up.”]
7. I keep in touch with fellow students through email.
8. Mostly we use LINE group talk or individual talk.
9. Meeting fellow students in schooling gave me a valuable opportunity to exchange ideas on my thesis topic with them and strengthen close relationships between us, which probably exerts a beneficial influence on my future study. Clearly the summer school is successful in motivating students. As for other communication tools [to] connect us together, I have not used any means because I am too busy with business, and with the other community I belong to but the existence of fellow students in NGU itself helps me continue studying, by thinking of them and their hard work on thesis.
10. I contact graduate students by email and on Facebook.
11. I use NGU email for connecting with others. Besides, we have a LINE group among good friends. On LINE talking we can talk more casually than in NGU group mail so I use both depending on purpose.
12. * I don't keep in touch with fellow students but at schoolings I talked with many fellow students. [Later, responding to the question if there were no schooling, notes feeling lonely, “I think I would benefit less. ... I am encouraged to study harder when I meet my fellow students.”]
13. Approximately once a month - group talk using LINE.
14. * I didn't keep in touch with them. [Also would benefit less from no schooling as “other graduate students inspire me to study” and “At schooling I can ask questions directly.”]

IV. In terms of the *kinds of support students offer each other (“check all that apply”)*: of the 36 respondents 19 say they share/compare notes on the content of classes, 17 offer each other books, papers, and/or advice, and 12 read and comment on each other's work.

Further comments on *kinds of support* from 2~3rd years/graduates (8/22 responded):

1. I exchanged ideas and support with some students through Internet.
2. We talk about our health and family.
3. So far I have not supported each other.
4. Moral support.
5. Each student had the opportunity to give a mid-term presentation about their thesis. Others asked questions which I found helpful to clarify the points I had neglected.

6. We exchange information whenever visiting campus.
7. No we didn't but I was encouraged through exchanging information.
8. No I didn't support others but made contact with the student coordinator.

Comments from 1st years on *kinds of support* (2/14):

1. Some classes in schooling gave us an assignment which we should submit by the end of August. There was less time to prepare for it so we discussed what was possible, or appropriate answers, which helped me to write reports more effectively and efficiently.
2. I sometimes ask my friends when I have questions about assignments.

V. We also asked *if schooling enriches the experience of graduate study in other ways*⁸

2~3rd years'/graduates responses on *whether schooling enriches the experience of graduate study in other ways* (14/22 answered):

1. If I had not had the chance to attend the schoolings and support each other I might have dropped off the course. I would think that schoolings are the only place that gives you motivation. The schoolings reminded me of the stiff resolutions I made.
2. Yes it did. The schooling made me improve my study a lot.
3. I got the motivation to study whenever attending schooling.
4. I was able to learn many things such as SLA, feminism, and my graduate study is good for my job.
5. Of course, yes! One encounter creates another. I met some great professors and students. Some students are also high school English teachers so we shared some information.
6. Many had similar jobs to me so I was able to understand their work and got information from them before and after schooling.
7. I learned not only from instructors but fellow students. Students don't have as much knowledge but they are able to see things from different perspectives than mine and that was as valuable as an instructor's.
8. * I don't know yet. [Also notes that without schooling "I could not continue to study."]
9. Attending the lectures on site helped raise my motivation towards my graduate study.
10. * Not particularly. [Also notes "I did not seek any help from other students at all" but that on site classes were "important to me."]
11. Yes it was stimulating to know others were working hard.
12. It made me feel that I was studying at a graduate school.

8 This question was probably poorly-designed as some answers do not quite respond to the question "other ways."

13. Yes I could get a great opportunity to learn the professional work of fellow students and broaden my perspective.
14. It encouraged me by showing I was not alone.

1st years’ responses on *whether schooling enriches the experience of graduate study in other ways* (11/14 answered):

1. Schooling enriched my experience of graduate work, how to do it, etc.,
2. Communicating with other students and professors makes me feel enthusiastic.
3. The experience provides me [with] the chance to exchange opinions with other students.
4. We had lunch, dinner, walked around Nagoya. Many of them are from Nagoya area so they showed me around the city.
5. I have not felt any yet but probably how I spent [the time] there will give something special later.
6. Knowing the thesis theme of other students gives me a hint on how to develop my thesis topic. Communication with them offers me fresh ideas, which might lead to solving the difficult situation I am in now.
7. I think schooling is worth [while] . Maybe it will be able to change to studying on the web (for some subjects) but I prefer schooling.
8. Before schooling I had no confidence to continue graduate study because I couldn’t handle it with the other things in my life. But I noticed so many wonderful things through classes and talking with friends. I felt I could keep going and it’s necessary to improve my English ability. Now I can deal with study better than before schooling.
9. Schooling made difficult subjects easy to understand.
10. I don’t think so.
11. I learned how to write research papers and how to reference previous research. When the professor told me face to face that my research is so far good, I felt reassured.

VI. We asked *if students feel they’d benefit more or less if all study was online and there were no schoolings*.

2~3rd year responses (all answered - 3 said they could manage without schooling; 1 was somewhat ambivalent):

1. If I had not had the chance to attend the schoolings and support each other I might have dropped off the course. I would think that schoolings are the only place that gives you motivation. The schoolings reminded me of the stiff resolutions I made. There’d be less or no benefit.
2. Study without schooling would have made it impossible to enrich my studies. Schooling was very important to receive the method of study and instruction.

3. It would not benefit me because getting and exchanging research or study information directly is different from getting it through email or online.
4. I think I'd benefit less. If I did my study completely via email or online I would be filled with a feeling of loneliness and would drop out.
5. I think my motivation may go down in half a year.
6. Less!!
7. Without any schooling I might have lost my way in my research work. I cannot spare time to attend classes. That's why I chose NGU. However, meeting and sharing opinions with my professor directly is necessary and ideal.
8. I would benefit less because my motivation would go down. I'd feel more stress.
9. I first realized how valuable schooling can be during the two or more years of the MA course. I experienced how effective peer learning can be.
10. * Academically the same. [Also said "I would like to contact some [peers] after completing my research project ... [and] attending the NGU program still allows me to come back to my hometown."]
11. If I had no schooling I could not continue to study.
12. * It could be done by email or online but I still think schooling is necessary for some students. If we could choose either way it would be more convenient for us.
13. * I think I could have done assignments and a thesis in the same way because I did not seek help from other students at all.
14. Meeting others and attending classes were valuable.
15. Schooling did encourage and motivate me to keep learning more.
16. Meeting with other students and talking with them was both fun and helpful.
17. I'd have benefited less because no schooling means no face-to-face communications with teachers or with other students.
18. It's not enough for me to study online or via email. I think it's very important for distance learning students to study face to face because the students can learn from the faces as well as the lectures of the professors.
19. I'd benefit less. Without schooling it would be difficult to share ideas with others, develop my thinking in my research field, and build my network of contacts.
20. It was important to exchange ideas with others. And mail can send limited information compared to direct communication.
21. * As for me there may be no differences. NGU's distance learning curriculum is complete in every detail.
22. I would easily drop out.

1st years’ responses on *whether they’d benefit more or less without any schooling* (14/14 answered - 1 thought it possible to manage without schooling):

1. I would benefit less. I got a great spiritual benefit.
2. Studying alone is one-way study. Interacting with students can solve many problems I am facing.
3. In my opinion, I don’t try hard if there is no schooling.
4. * Schooling is good in terms of meeting classmates and advisors, however, as each online student has a different area of study and research, I think I can work by myself communicating with teachers and advisors.
5. Having no schooling would provide less. Through summer schooling I learned it is very important to discuss in person with other students and faculty members. During schooling I gained a lot of ideas and encouragement.
6. I [would] give up my study halfway through without the schoolings.
7. If only email and online, that would not be beneficial. Even for a short period we took lectures in class and could share ideas, so we could not have those experiences if there was no schooling.
8. Before entering this graduate school, I thought there is some discussion with professors and students through the internet but there is not at all so if there were no schooling it would be difficult to motivate myself to concentrate on studying so the schooling helps a lot.
9. Less probably. Face to face communication allows us to come up with more ideas and become capable as a group. If there were no schooling, we may forget being a student, which might lead to an increasing dropout rate.
10. If I had no schooling I think I couldn’t understand my studies.
11. Although email is very convenient to keep in touch with the office, it is not sufficient for study. If I have no schooling, study at graduate school would be different from now. I would just read so many books and do assignments. I think an online system is functional but schooling is emotional.
12. I would benefit less. Studying alone I sometimes feel lonely. I am encouraged to study harder when I meet my fellow students because they’re doing their best in spite of difficulties.
13. Less. I would not have understood Chomsky’s Universal Grammar.
14. I’d benefit less. At schooling I can ask questions directly.

VII. **Asked *would they still choose NGU if it were all online***: 13 said they would still choose NGU because cost was their main concern while 12 said they particularly wanted a chance *to meet* with other students like them. 23 said that their main reason for choosing a low residency program was due to family/professional obligations; 1 was happy to work independently.

Further 2nd~3rd years' comments on *whether they'd choose NGU if all study was online* (5/22):

1. I was enjoying the schooling very much - to see the professors, classmates and student coordinators. I was able to meet them and so I was so relieved to keep studying as a correspondence student.
2. If the tuition of other universities were the same I'd choose a university with some schooling.
3. I believe most of the students I met in NGU had some sorts of obligations otherwise they'd have chosen to attend fulltime graduate school. Probably for all of us going to a low residency school was our 2nd best choice. Now I believe that studying at college without a chance of peer learning is like tasting half the box of mixed candies.
4. Maybe yes. Attending the NGU program still allows me to come back to my hometown. [We assume this student is from Nagoya originally.]
5. Distance learning must require schooling. If NGU had no schooling it wouldn't be a university.

Further 1st years' comments on *whether they'd choose NGU if all study was online* (4):

1. Frankly, I don't know. The schooling system wasn't familiar to me at that time.
2. No. I believe learning from other students and faculty members is a crucial factor for meaningful graduate study.
3. No. The schooling is necessary for me.
4. I didn't think schooling would have such a great effect on me when I decided to go to NGU. The reason why I chose NGU was that it was difficult for me to go to a fulltime graduate school, so schooling wasn't a reason to choose NGU. However, as I mentioned, if I had no schooling, it would be much harder to study by myself.

A number of respondents offered suggestions and further comments at the end of the questionnaire. These are listed in Appendix I. Some offered ideas for making it easier for students to keep in touch over the semester, others added their appreciation for schooling, and a few offered other helpful comments. Interestingly, one student/ graduate suggested that some graduates would be happy to return to help out at schoolings for new students - if NGU would pay travel expenses.

What have we learned?

It appears that most students genuinely value schoolings. The four who felt they could do their work without attending schooling were straightforward and consistent in their answers. We did not allow, however, for the possibility that 1st years didn't see their orientation weekend as "schooling" or that 2nd and 3rd years *excluded their one-on-one, in-person tutorials with their faculty supervisors* from the

concept of “schooling.” For instance, one commented, “I think I can work by myself communicating with teachers and advisors” but it isn’t clear as to whether this person is considering the individual tutorials given when some professors travel to Tokyo, for example, to meet with their students.

Curiously, while a few seemed to desire more schooling in the 2nd year (see Appendix I), most did not comment on the amount of schooling offered, though one did say that optional attendance would make it “easier to complete the course.”

While we did not ask about the experience of attending thesis proposal presentations (*chukan happyo*) or of presenting thesis proposals during the summer schooling period, a few students said these were helpful so we might consider the value and structure of this event further. Certainly, at GGI when the graduating students give 45-minute presentations about their theses/final products, they are well attended by returning and new students and often feature as positive (even inspirational) features of the residency in Residency Reflection Essays or GGI end-of-residency in-person evaluation sessions.⁹

What next?

For some years studies have suggested that faculty involved in online education must design strategies to reduce isolation, such as platforms for both synchronous and asynchronous interaction (McInerney & Roberts, 2004). It has also been assumed that synchronous distance education (e.g. video conferencing) might compensate for the lack of in-person exchanges in distance education but that assumption continues to be challenged by various studies (Bluic, Goodyear and Ellis, 2007; Means et al., 2013)¹⁰. At GGI while very small groups have held synchronous seminars, we’ve found that time differences and work schedules make asynchronous connections more viable, though others have noted that without close faculty monitoring of discussion boards, misinformation can easily spread swiftly or, because asynchronous comments tend to be numerous/longer, lead to “information overload” (Mackey, 1989, p. 391; Picciano 2002). NGU students, too, often have to work odd hours and/or over weekends so scheduling synchronous meetings would seem very challenging.

The UK’s Open University (OU) has developed a hugely detailed system for ensuring student persistence by assessing student vulnerability, tracking students’ digital moves on various assignment platforms, and intervening to offer supports if individuals seem to be straying (see Tynan, “Learning Analytics” for a detailed description of OU data management). Most institutions would find this

9 Most GGI students include a reflective essay on their learning at residencies with their first assignments of the semester and a number fill out general Residency Evaluation forms that include questions about food, accommodations, workshops, etc.

10 Yamagata-Lynch (2014) believes synchronous can complement asynchronous learning in 100% online graduate courses although this does require considerable facilitator training.

logistically and financially unfeasible - if students agreed to such monitoring (which is hard to imagine at GGI) - so these institutions will no doubt go on experimenting according to resources available and the characteristics of their particular student population, as do both NGU and GGI (Picciano, 2009¹¹).

Our study found that over 77% of NGU respondents keep in touch with their peers outside of schoolings and even those who didn't still appreciate the exchanges at schoolings, or said schoolings boost their motivation. Some GGI first semester students have reported feeling isolated or that their motivation sags after the intensity of contact at residencies so GGI instituted a 6-week online introduction to graduate study course that allows new students to connect with each other by responding to various assignments (readings, video lectures, etc.) on a discussion board, offering comments, and reviewing peers' critical papers. This enforced contact appears to help strengthen cohort relationships though we continue to modify the course in response to student suggestions and do not have sufficient significant data to report yet.

Another study presented us with further food for thought, however. In Ali and Leeds (2009) study, "The Impact of Face-to-Face Orientation on Online Retention: A Pilot Study," the effect of *introducing* a face-to-face orientation was dramatic. In 2008 their state university's College of Business was found to have an average 9% attrition rate across departments while the year-old online B.B.A. average drop rate was 23%. In order to test means of increasing retention ("defined as course completion with grade of 'D' or better"), the authors designed a strategy beginning with "an early email contact [later resent] , distribution of course documents, a follow-up phone call, and a pre-course face-to-face orientation" (Ali and Leeds, p. 2). This *one-hour* orientation covered "six topics: (1) online learning success strategies, (2) course content and navigation, (3) technology, (4) graded discussions and assignments, (5) textbook and exams, and (6) team projects" (p. 5). A video of each topic was posted for further use. Of 64 enrolled students 35 actually attended the orientation though 11 of those who did not said "that they had watched the video" (p. 6). What is surprising is that 32 of the 35 who attended the orientation were retention successes (D or better) and most progression successes (C or better and moved to the next course), and 23 (of 29) who did not attend were retention failures (F, W/F, or W).

While the focus is undergraduates and this study that does not account for other variables that might have impacted students' success, or progression, the clear divide between those who attended orientation and those who did not indicates that in-person orientation is significant and studies since suggest that the design of orientations or online learning readiness trainings could have a significant

11 Picciano (2009) notes "because learners represent different generations, different personality types, and different learning styles, teachers and instructional designers should seek to use multiple approaches including face-to-face methods and online technologies that meet the needs of a wide spectrum of students. Critical to this model is the concept that academic program and course goals and objectives drive the pedagogical approaches and technologies used" (pp. 3-4).

impact on students’ persistence (Robichaud, 2015; Butler, Davis, Greene & Span, 2012).¹²

Given the rather personalized nature of our small graduate schools (with faculty responding individually to students in both schools, and with GGI students designing their own syllabi), effective learning about our respective systems probably requires rigorous qualitative studies of specific practices, such as:

- The effectiveness of in-person orientations in preparing students for distance education (and whether they could be enhanced);
- How students feel that supportive community is created (or not) and if it is due to the internal culture/values of the institution (e.g. pedagogy, institutional values, cultural memory) or the culture(s) created at each schooling or residency? (E.g. Does schooling build trust that makes a peer group supportive? Is that what one respondent meant by: “an online system is functional but schooling is emotional”?)
- Whether competition/lack thereof between students impacts their sense of supportive community (observing schoolings at NGU, we find that Japanese adults are generally inclined to be cooperative and positive in situations that require them to be together for short periods of time; regarding GGI, see Campbell or Lissard, 2017);
- What factors make students drop out (anecdotal evidence at NGU indicates that work obligations, difficulty in getting time off, illness or natural disasters have been the main issues in recent years and with GGI students, financial or family-related challenges or illness may be major causes but interviews with students who drop out would shed a clearer light);
- To what extent students find a particular means of communication (e.g. an experimental asynchronous course) workable or valuable;
- Whether student and faculty training in managing digital platforms is a promising area of inquiry (are the systems we currently use isolating, confusing, hard to manage?).

Appeal

We hope that our students and graduates will read this report and offer us feedback on needed future research. We sincerely thank all respondents for taking the time to offer their feedback and ideas and look forward to hearing more from them.

¹² From data currently available, retention in NGU’s low-residency English program was 68.18% in 2012, 86.66% in 2013 (3 still enrolled), 100% in 2014 (5 still enrolled), 78.94% in 2015 (15 still enrolled). In GGI (Individualized Program) it was 90% in S. 12, 89% in F. 12, 81% in S. 13

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Appendix I

Further comments offered by NGU students and graduates

2nd~3rd years/graduates

- If possible 1 day or half day sightseeing in Nagoya with fellow students.
- People who want to study English systematically should come to this school. Fortunately, I found this school and had wonderful professors and Student Coordinator, though. Thanks to this English Graduate school I was able to improve not only my English proficiency but also the value and satisfaction with myself, and I got a future guideline for living through the study for my thesis.
- It would be better to have more schooling in the 2nd year to receive instruction and advice from academic advisors directly for writing the thesis and to have chances to meet other students.
- I want you to put up a message board on the Internet in order to exchange views with fellow students at schooling.
- Although NGU has DeskNets, CCS and Homepage, there are out of date links. And CCS seems to be mainly for commuting students. DeskNet hasn't been accessible for recent students so we can't see who our classmates are. NGU should run a sort of blog - an open space for every graduate student so we can share our projects before and after schooling. We don't have time to attend regularly but we want to get lectures and discussion directly. If we can communicate on the blog we will be able to share our opinion more smoothly at schooling. If we could get lectures through open courseware, things would dramatically change. One professor runs his own homepage to give students lectures. [Basically requesting some kind of open platform/intranet?] I really appreciate all the professors and teachers and mates.
- I'm very grateful to be in the program. Thank you!
- I felt as if I were presenting in an academic conference in summer [at the mid-term thesis presentations]. I learned some things, especially for assignments in actual classes during summer and winter schooling. In these respects schooling was important for me.
- Although I think that schooling motivates students to learn more, it's sometimes difficult for some students to attend the whole schooling on fixed days. If they could choose to attend or not it would be easier to complete the course.
- I hope students will be able to exchange their opinions about their study at schooling.
- The student coordination system is a great help. I hope it continues.
- If graduates could have the opportunity to visit the schooling to offer advice on choosing classes, how to submit homework, talk about our experiences, new students would appreciate it. If you'd pay our travel expenses we'd be happy to spare time for new students.

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- Thank you very much for your support. I had a wonderful experience at NGU. I wish you go on educating graduate students and wish you all the best.
- Thanks to this English Graduate School, NGU by correspondence, I was able to improve not only my English proficiency but also the value and the feeling of satisfaction with myself were provided, and I got future guidelines on living via the study for my thesis.
- I'm really happy to have had the opportunity while working.
- I really appreciate all the professors and teachers and mates.
- Schooling is a good opportunity to contact the advisor so I think it's important for the course.
- Used textbook exchange (or donations) would be a big help.

1st years

- I appreciate that schooling provides a chance “to study something new with all students in the same classroom.”
- I'd prefer online course study with video lecture on demand and consult advisors online.
- I think students should be encouraged to speak up and share opinions and ideas more during lessons.
- Nothing to suggest about schooling. Teachers and officers were really kind to us.
- I hope we have more opportunities to talk with each other, not only with professors but also students through the internet. E.g. BBS or chat room, even if they are [about] non-schooling subjects.
- I think NGU professors and staff are kind because I can ask them about any questions I have.
- It was a pity I couldn't meet some teachers who've been checking my work by email to thank them directly.
- We have little time and chance to talk to professors. I would like to have more both during schooling and studying alone. Reunion get together (*konshinkai*) was a very good chance to talk with others. I wanted to have that kind of party on the first day of schooling. We had it on almost the last day this year.
- It would be good to obtain the results of this questionnaire.
- I wanted a chance to research my subject with graduate students in the library during schooling.
- Schooling was much more productive for me than I expected. If I had no schooling I could not communicate with other friends, and it would be difficult for me to understand classes that I attended at schooling.
- At schoolings I am very happy to study many things though I got very tired.

APPENDIX II ONE DAY IN A GGI RESIDENCY SCHEDULE

(Residency theme: “Journey”)

GGI students’ main areas of inquiry: Individualized Study, Health Arts & Sciences, Social Innovation & Sustainability, Consciousness Studies, Transformative Language Arts

TUESDAY AUGUST 9, 2016	
<i>GAS: THESIS PROPOSALS ARE DUE TO YOUR ADVISOR BY NOON TODAY</i>	
7:30–8:15 am	Yoga/Morning Movement (Self-Organized): Manor Oak Room
7:30–8:15 am	Birds, Place and Connection, 2 of 3 bird walks, w/ faculty member James Sparrell: Meet in front of the Community Center
7:45–9:00 am	<i>Breakfast: Dining Hall</i>
9:00–10:30 am	Advising Groups Meet: See last page for locations
10:45–12:15 pm	“Nationalism, Difference and the Cosmopolitan Conversation: Listening, Connecting, and Designing Research for Change,” w/ faculty members Katt Lissard and Karen Campbell: CC 207 Media Room “What is ‘Theory’ and Why is it (or is it not) Important?” w/ faculty members Francis X. Charet and Sarah Van Hoy: Clockhouse
11:45–1:00 pm	<i>Lunch: Dining Hall</i>
1:00–2:00 pm	Faculty Meeting: Review of Thesis Proposals: Cottage
1:00–2:30 pm	“Writing from the Wild Edge,” w/ SIS-TLA returning student Rachel Economy: This workshop is intended to take place outside: Meet in front of the Community Center. (In case of inclement weather: Manor Oak Room.) “Textile Upcycling: Don’t Stop the Journey (Techniques on Increasing Garment Life Span),” w/ SIS returning student Kelly McDowell: Clockhouse “Balancing Act: The Body’s Journey into Awareness,” w/ HAS returning student Susan Wilkes: Haybarn Gallery
2:00–2:30 pm	* New Student Orientation: Introduction to the Writing Center, w/ writing coach: CC 207 Media Room
2:45–4:15 pm	“Movement Practices for Feeling, Knowing, Being and Creating” w/ faculty member Lori Wynters: Haybarn Theatre “Pilgrimages: Outward Journeys to Inward Places,” w/ faculty member Francis X. Charet: Manor Oak Room
4:30–6:00 pm	“Journey to a Passionate Livelihood, Part2: Whole Self, Real World Facilitation,” w/ faculty member Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg: Cottage “Othered Forms of Knowing: Decolonizing the Body,” with faculty members Sarah Van Hoy and Lise Weil: Clockhouse
5:45–7:00 pm	<i>Dinner: Dining Hall</i>
6:00–7:00 pm	Student Focus Group: Gariot Louima, Dean of Enrollment and External Affairs wants to talk with you about your Goddard experience. Join him in CC 207 Media Room
7:15–8:45 pm	Keynote Presentation: Seeing Your Way Clear Through Transformative Narratives,” with Visiting Scholar, Yvette Hyater-Adams (IMA-TLA ’03): Haybarn Theatre
9:00 PM	Support Group Meetings: See “Residency Notices” section for more information. [Groups students choose to create, e.g. Interfaith, AA, LGBTQ, People of Color, White Anti-racists, etc.]