

Leading & Managing Study Abroad During and Post-Pandemic: An Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This paper shares the lived experience of both leading and managing an international exchange center at a Japanese university through a transformational leadership lens. Over the course of the pandemic, the center director was charged with predicting threats, dealing with crises, identifying the need for change, creating a vision for both during and post-pandemic, and executing that change in collaboration with colleagues.

The research takes an autoethnographic approach where the researcher recounts the story of her own personal experience, coupled with an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and implications of that experience. The use of autoethnography attempts to provide a unique opportunity for a simultaneous analysis of the particularities of leadership practice and management roles across different socio-cultural environments. This study infuses the author's own emotional reactions to being immersed in the challenges of working as a non-Japanese in a Japanese context as she challenged dominant paradigms and attempted to move the university policy, procedures, and systems forward through to a new normal.

1. Introduction

“What kind of leader do I want to be?”

I scrawled this question at the top of my new notebook in 2020, the notebook I would use as I embarked on my new journey as a Director of the International Exchange Center (IEC). This research focuses on defining leadership identity and transformational leadership before exploring how I navigated my role as leader of the center in a Japanese university. This paper explores critical incidents and management and leadership reactions to those incidents, exploring concrete examples of how, with a sense of hope, optimism, and energy, our team worked towards restarting study abroad post-pandemic. As Bochner and Ellis (2006) argue, an autoethnographer is first and foremost a communicator and a storyteller and as such, this paper is written in the first person and attempts to share aesthetic and evocative descriptions of my personal and interpersonal experiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Leadership Identity

This research is grounded in the concept of leadership identity, defined as the extent to which one sees themselves as a leader (Day, 2011). There has been much research on the follower's perspective (Postmes & Branscombe, 2010, Reicher, Spears & Halsam, 2010), yet a more limited and narrow view exists of the leader's perspective of his/her identity and role in their leadership, thus an autoethnography is a useful way to explore this phenomenon.

Leadership development is a broad term and typically involves analyzing behaviors when individuals change their perceived identity as a leader (Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). Construction of one's identity is a relational and social process (Ely et al., 2011; Shollen, 2018) and one way to explore leadership identity is through self-perception theory. This postulates that the extent to which one perceives oneself as a leader is

the extent to which one will be perceived by others as a leader. Self-perception has been identified as inextricably linked to studying and understanding leader identity (Miscenko and Day, 2016; Miscenko et al., 2017).

2.2. Transformational Leadership

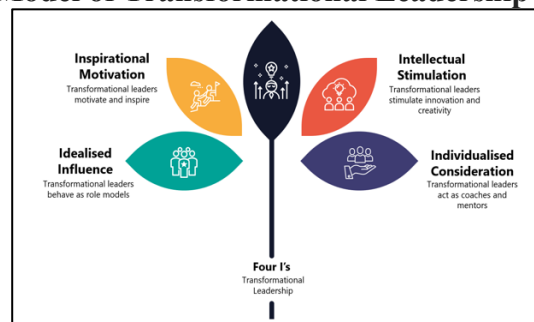
Through my time as Director, while exploring my leadership identity, I have also been exploring to what extent I could be a transformational leader. Transformational leadership has been found the most effective leadership style (Bass, 1999; Leithwood, 1992). According to Bush (2020) the transformational leadership model is a collegial management model.

“A transforming leader is a continuum process in which a leader and a follower reciprocally help each other to advance to a higher level of morals and motivation, and it creates significant changes for individual’s life and organizations.” (Baba et.al. 2019:5)

In this type of leadership and management, leaders attempt to empathize with followers’ intrinsic motivations and personal development opportunities. They try to combine other aspirations and needs with organizational outcomes. Voon, Lo, Ngui, & Ayob (2011) found that in complex situations, transformational leaders are often seen as ideal persons of change who could lead followers in times of uncertainties and high risk situations (such as the pandemic).

The Four I’s of transformational leadership conceptualized by Bass (1985) (Figure 1) are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. Idealized influence is the ability of leaders to demonstrate self-confidence and power by acting as role models for their followers. Inspirational motivation refers to how capable a leader is to articulate his/her vision that can inspire followers. Individualized consideration is the degree to which the leader attends to each followers needs and acts as a mentor, or a coach and intellectual stimulation refers to the degree to which the leaders stimulate their followers to be creative and innovative to overcome challenges and reach new goals.

Figure 1: Model of Transformational Leadership the Four I’s



Source: Bass & Avolio (1994)

Within transformational leadership, followers are encouraged to try new approaches, and their ideas are not criticized because they differ from the leaders’ ideas. The managers attempt to create a psychologically safe space whereby the ‘fear of failure’ is alleviated. One aspect of this is psychological safety. It is considered to be one of the keys to innovation as operating with a lack of psychological safety arrests the development of the human capital within the

organisation and halts creativity. The workplace needs to have positive relationships, supportive practices, strong relationship practices and everyone needs to share positive work characteristics.

This autoethnography has been a way of exploring these themes throughout the pandemic and attempts to answer the question, *What kind of leader do I want to be?* Or more through the end of this process, *What kind of leader did I become?*

3. Research Method

3.1. Autoethnography

Butler-Kisber (2010) states, “individually or collaboratively [autoethnographers] use narrative dialogue, self-study/autobiographical and memory work to construct stories of their own experiences” (p. 65). This situates autoethnography in the tradition of narrative research. However, other scholars situate it more within an ethnographic tradition. As an example, Creswell (2013) highlights the focus on cultural meaning in autoethnographic narratives, observing that they “contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual’s story” (p. 73). I have been drawn to it as a method to be able to view and reflect on my experience of being a leader from different viewpoints to help understand my cultural experience.

Miscenko and Day (2016) put forward two different perspectives on engaging identity and work: static and dynamic. The dynamic approach understands that identity is ‘constantly under construction’ (Miscenko and Day, 2016, p. 224), as such, an autoethnography conducted over the course of two and a half years is a useful way to collect information on how a leader constructs his/her identity.

Since April 2020, I have retained all my notebooks, emails, documents, and message exchanges that relate to my work as Director of the IEC, and these served as the main source of data for this study. I was able to code and analyze conversations and reflections relating to certain critical incidents. Once I had collected these artifacts, the key to analysis was on synthesizing the information and being able to ‘see’ as Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky (2009) describe. It is important to be able to ‘see’ not only the ‘dancefloor’ but also the ‘balcony.’ Therefore, I used a combination of qualitative research traditions to analyze my data; a combination of ethnographic research, descriptive qualitative research and narrative research (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022).

The results are presented in an analytical-interpretive writing style which includes some explanation during the storytelling of how the story of the last two and a half years pertains to the broader context. In some ways, the “discussion” is woven into the paper itself (e.g., Reilly, 2013) but I have also pulled out a few key learnings at the end. I have attempted to share a style of autoethnographic writing that supports the reader to learn more about how to conduct autoethnography while also learning more about leadership. Although the paper does not precisely follow the traditional format of a qualitative research paper, I have included an introduction to the context and purpose of the study, a review of literature that frames the key concepts, a description of the procedures followed, a presentation of results (the story), and a discussion of those findings and how they contribute new understanding. The quotes scattered in the results section are taken from message exchanges between the director of the IEC and the team.

4. Results

4.1. My Background

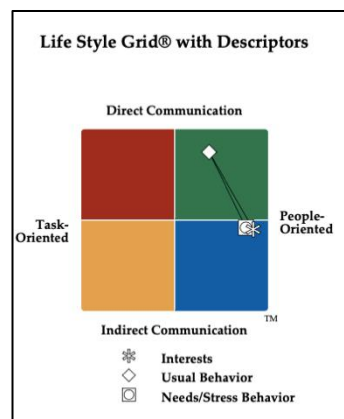
I was born in Wales and moved to Japan at the age of 21, unable to speak Japanese but in search of adventure. I majored in geography as an undergraduate and travelled on a geography fieldtrip to Iceland and taught English in Spain during those formative years. I have always had a deep sense of wanderlust. I am passionate about travel and the life-changing opportunities it provides for our young people as I was able to experience it firsthand.

After 3 years working in a Junior High School in rural Japan, I did a MA and started teaching English at a university in the same area. I continued studying and obtained my doctorate in Education Management and began working at Toyo Gakuen University¹ in 2006 at the age of 25. I became tenured in 2008 and subsequently was asked to join the International Exchange Center as a committee member the same year. Over the past sixteen years, I have chaperoned students overseas more than 10 times, welcomed numerous international students to Japan, and travelled the world visiting university partners, and presenting my research on entrepreneurship at international conferences. I spent four years working as a Deputy Director, took a sabbatical in Europe, the USA, and South America between 2018-2019 and I became the Director in April 2020. After years of studying education management, I was excited that I now had an opportunity to put theory into practice and develop my skills as a leader.

4.2. My Leadership Style

On taking up the role of Director, it was important to consider what I already knew about my leadership style. In 2016, while working in Houston, Texas, I took a Birkman² Test to establish my working and leadership style. I found out that I was considered to be a knowledge specialist, this means that I tend to contribute and lead by utilizing my personal experience and knowledge to find solutions; I like to lead by example.

Fig. 2. Results of My Birkman Test



In addition, I tend to have a delegative management style whereby I utilize plans and strategies, arrange resources and assist coworkers and team from the front line. I don't tend to exercise authority and have a positive attitude towards not only my personal growth and development but also others and I am motivated to make contributions to the team while also exercising professional responsibility. The results of the test also indicated that I have a positive

¹ www.tyg.jp

² The Birkman Test is a personality assessment that measures psychological characteristics and behavior. The test is used by companies for hiring and as a career assessment for college students to help identify the candidate's strengths and weaknesses in the areas of motivation, behavior, communication, and teamwork. The author took this test in 2016.

commitment to the people in my organization, I am optimistic when I face unexpected changes, I am tolerant and trust others easily. And finally, that I value and support social conventions, which is a positive attribute living and working in a foreign country, particularly Japan.

4.3. The Team & The Context

Our team consists of faculty members and administration staff working together on a wide portfolio of tasks. I have oversight of all inbound programs (short-term faculty-led study abroad, internships, foreign students), outbound programs (long-term, short-term, internships, language learning, experiential learning programs, etc.), Outreach projects (speech contests, international days and event, career guidance, buddy programs, domestic internships), Management (risk management, mid-long-term strategy planning, PDCA, accreditation, budget, partnerships) and had international oversight during the pandemic. The team consists of one professor from the USA, one administrator from China, four additional Japanese administrators and 14 Japanese professors. The working language of the center is Japanese. We deliver our programs cross all faculties of the university and while also being the Director, I also teach as a professor in the faculty of business administration.

From 2020 to the current day, I have been responsible for not only the activities of the international exchange but also for monitoring the global pandemic situation and developing policies for faculty, students, and staff in relation to overseas activities.

There were three critical incidents at the start of the pandemic: closing (and then restarting) all programs, switching to 100% online, and the need/speed to innovate.

Closing Programs: We immediately closed all our overseas programs. This decision was easy and was done quickly and effectively:

“We were a good team and it really needed fast action so as we can work together so well it wasn’t as bad as it could have been” (April 2020)

The Japanese government also took the lead in closing the borders to international students and thus, we were forced to adapt quickly to these new policies. While the decision to close was easy, the decision to open was extremely difficult. The international center took the lead in collecting and disseminating the data because we suspected that:

“the HR department doesn’t seem to be following any of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs updates so they don’t know about quarantine rules, etc, blue, red countries etc... they need all the information from us. We need to step up and lead this.” (June 2020)

We used Excel to create a live database of the most up-to-date information pertaining to our partner destinations. Then, when we had to make decisions, they were data-driven and we could evaluate with rigor and confidence. Firstly, we looked at what travel advisories and restrictions were in place as this helped to assess the level of risk.

Secondly, we looked at vaccination rates and health guidelines. The vaccination rates within the university community in the host country (and surrounding areas) were significant factors. We looked at the overall percentage of the population that had been vaccinated and the level of protection it provided against the virus and weighed this up against the vaccination status of our students in order to give them the best advice for travel. We also examined the health guidelines and protocols in the host country to ensure that adequate measures were in place to safeguard the health and well-being of students and worked closely with clinics on campus.

Thirdly, we looked at the COVID-19 general case rates and trends for each country. This was difficult to obtain at times but looking at the bed occupancy rates was an important factor to

ascertain whether our students could get access to medical care in-country. The stability of case rates and the trend of declining or manageable infection rates were key factors in determining the feasibility of our study abroad programs.

Finally, we redeveloped risk mitigation measures by developing new policies and documents (such as a new Overseas Travel During COVID Form) that would help address potential challenges and ensure the safety of not only students participating in study abroad programs but also faculty and staff going overseas for personal reasons and conferences. These plans included new protocols for pre-departure testing, quarantine measures, on-site health monitoring, access to healthcare services, and contingency plans in case of emergencies.

We knew that accountability and transparency were important:

“We need to be clear and explain the process of how we made the decision and make sure we put it to a vote of the committee members, everyone has to be clear on what we plan to do and believe in our capability. I want to be clear and concise and professional.” (March 2022)

We were able to restart our long-term study abroad in August 2022. We were one of the first universities in Japan to restart short-term study abroad by sending a program to the U.K. During that trip the testing requirements and potential quarantine restrictions were a constant worry, but the two-week program ran without any issues and gave us confidence to expand programs in 2023.

Switching to 100% Online: The switch online caused a great deal of stress for many colleagues. The reactions varied depending on their individual circumstances and experience. The most pressing issue was the need for faculty and staff development, so I immediately held a workshop on how to use Zoom, face-to-face, before we were forced to stay at home. This was one of our first and final opportunities to get together as a team before teleworking was enforced. The session immediately helped to build trust and confidence among the team. In addition, we actually had fun learning how to use TEAMS and enjoyed sending each other cute little messages and pictures to encourage or support each other. In some ways it led to a greater sense of connection and intimacy than we had had previously.

Another source of stress was the increased workload. Many of my colleagues found that teaching and holding meetings online required additional time and effort compared to traditional in-person teaching. They had to spend extra time preparing digital materials, recording or livestreaming lessons, and providing individualized support to students remotely. Administrators also had to manage the logistical aspects of online learning, including coordinating schedules, ensuring equitable access to technology, and addressing concerns from parents and staff.

The final source of stress was the emotional impact that working online had on my colleagues. Many missed the face-to-face interaction with their students and colleagues. The absence of physical classroom and office environments and the challenges of building relationships and maintaining student engagement remotely were sources of emotional strain. It was stressful to see the world closing down, as our main purpose was to introduce students to the big wide world. However, overall, the team embraced the opportunity to innovate and find creative solutions being online.

Need to Innovate: As part of the shift to working online, we needed to be innovative in the programs that we developed. There were three key innovations: virtual exchange programs, enhanced technology integration, and development of global collaborative projects. All of these

increased students' accessibility to international educational experiences. As a result, virtual exchange programs with our established partners emerged as a substitute to physical exchanges, offering students the opportunity to engage with international peers, participate in cross-cultural activities, and collaborate on projects through virtual platforms like TEAMS, Zoom and Google Classroom. The pandemic also accelerated the integration of other types of technology in international education. We started to use new learning management systems for international projects and experimented with virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) applications. Anecdotally, these enhanced teaching and learning experiences, fostered student engagement, and provided personalized learning opportunities for students isolated during the pandemic.

The most important innovation was the development of global collaborative projects or what is termed Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). We began collaborating on global projects, leveraging digital platforms to connect and work together across borders, first piloting and then establishing our own COIL program. This facilitated cross-cultural understanding, promoted collaboration skills, and expanded students' perspectives beyond their local contexts. The program was so successful that it has been further adopted in a wider university context.

4.4. Evidence of Application of the I's of Transformational Leadership

As I mentioned in section 2.5 there are four I's of transformational leadership. Collectively, these four I's capture the essence of transformational leadership and highlight the leader's ability to inspire, motivate, challenge, and support their followers. By embodying these dimensions, it is thought that transformational leaders create a positive and empowering work environment fostering personal growth and organizational success. This section shares some evidence of how I attempted to apply the I's both knowingly and unknowingly and have been able to make connections between them through reflecting on my practice.

Individual Consideration: Showing individual consideration as a transformational manager involves demonstrating genuine care, support, and personalized attention to the needs, aspirations, and development of each team member. There were three main things that on reflection, were evidence of how I applied individual consideration to my team; offering coaching and mentoring, holding regular meetings, and offering training.

Coaching and Mentoring

I provided constructive feedback on performance and offered guidance for improvement. There were regular performance discussions to review progress, set goals, and offer support. This strategy helped to maximize my team's potential and navigate their workflow effectively.

Regular Meetings

I took time to understand each team member and did this by holding regular meetings and also trying to get in as many one-on-one conversations as possible, to build rapport and foster an open line of communication. I made sure that staff knew I would be available to answer questions, provide guidance, and offer assistance whenever needed both face-to-face if possible, or online.

Training

I worked with some team members to create individual development plans that aligned with their work-related goals for during the pandemic. This provided them with opportunities for

growth and advancement, helping them to build on their strengths and address areas for improvement.

Aside from the three points mentioned above, the most notable example of individual consideration was how I continually tried to encourage my team and support their wellbeing in person and through short messages:

“But let’s get sleep, everything is better after a sleep!! We need to take care of ourselves!

Thank you for your hard work!” (May 2022)

“Thank you for being so awesome, Keiko!” (September 2022)

Maybe this was a reflection of how I was feeling myself? The words of encouragement I was giving myself, I also tried to give to my team.

Idealized Influence: Idealized influence refers to the ability of a leader to serve as a role model and inspire followers through their actions, values, and behavior. During the pandemic I attempted to do this in two ways, by role modeling and trying to build trust.

I attempted to be a good role model for how to deliver online education and a role model for international travel post-pandemic. As mentioned in the previous section, in making the decision to restart study abroad programs we decided that I would be the ‘guinea pig’ and be the first employee of the university to travel overseas. Although it was met with some resistance, in doing so, I could take my learnings and tie them in to future programs:

“I’m learning a lot from being here! I have been taking a fast test every day here and it’s very convenient. I think we should also teach students about how to use these kinds of tests for their peace of mind. I can see now what we need to include in the preparation and decision making. It’s all so much clearer now.” (October 2021)

When I returned, everyone was very positive about my experience and it gave my colleagues the confidence to keep going, as seen in this quote from my office manager:

“Welcome Back! Thank you for going for us. When you are ready we will rock on the projects! Yay! Have a rest first! Let’s do this!”(October 2021)

This was one way I attempted to build trust; by being authentic, consistent, and reliable in my words and actions, even though the difficult times. I wanted to show that I had a strong willingness to create a sense of commitment and foster a sense of purpose in what we were doing among the team.

Intellectual Stimulation: In terms of intellectual stimulation, I attempted to foster innovation and creativity among the team, allowing people to express their ideas, try new things as they developed new programs. Developing COIL programs was particularly innovative and cross-border collaboration with our partners in the U.S.A. provided many opportunities for experimentation. It wasn’t always a success, but we created a culture of freedom and trust and accepted that failure was ok.

This research doesn’t cover the fourth ‘I’ of *inspirational motivation*, as I don’t think it is for me to say whether or not I inspire and motivate my colleagues and I wouldn’t want to assume one way or the other, therefore, I will focus on the results of actions that were tangible.

4.5.Cultural Learnings

Over the course of three years, the most significant question I kept returning to was “*how does being a single, white, female, non-Japanese impact my leadership style?*” Being a female leader

in Japan can present unique challenges due to cultural norms and gender-related expectations and unfortunately, I did find some challenges in this regard. Traditional cultural norms in Japan can discourage assertiveness and direct communication, which can be viewed as less feminine. I had to attend regular management meetings with the university President, Chairman, and members of the board. Not only was I the only non-Japanese but I was also the only woman in the room. At times I had challenges in asserting my ideas, opinions, and leadership style, especially in a male-dominated environment. I felt at times that I had to navigate expectations around politeness and indirect communication while also trying to be assertive.

Being single and childless during the pandemic also had advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were that I could have professional focus, especially as I had no other distractions during lockdown, I could dedicate almost all my time and energy to my job. I had flexibility and mobility to travel when restrictions were being lifted and it had no impact on a spouse or children. I also had a strong sense of independence and autonomy that may have impacted my decision-making style. The disadvantages included the social expectations and the limited support system I had at home. I was living alone in a foreign country with no friends and family in the immediate vicinity. This sometimes led to loneliness and social isolation. My job gave me a sense of harmony and belonging which may have been a reason why I was so keen to be empathetic and share emotions with my team.

As a single, female, leader of a department during the pandemic, immersing myself in my work at that time served as a distraction or coping mechanism. The pandemic brought about uncertainty, isolation, and anxiety but focusing on work may actually have provided me with a sense of purpose, structure, and control over my circumstances. In terms of being non-Japanese, the following section covers the different philosophical mindsets that I encountered during my leadership, much as a result of being non-Japanese.

How multicultural is my personality?

The more I thought about being a foreign leader of a predominately Japanese team, I began studying more about multicultural personalities and thought about what impact this could have on leadership. I found work by Van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2000) who developed the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). Their MPQ scales are focused on predicting multicultural success and include Cultural Empathy, Flexibility, Social Initiative, Emotional Stability and Open-mindedness. I felt that these tied in well with the concept of transformational leadership. While they are not directly comparable, there are some similarities and differences between them. Both concepts are related to leadership and have implications for cross-cultural contexts. For example, transformational leadership can be applied in diverse cultural settings and is often associated with positive outcomes in multicultural work environments. Similarly, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire assesses an individual's ability to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. I revisited the *Birkman* test to see what it said about my multicultural personality and unsurprisingly it said that I had a high global orientation and that I had an above-average resilience to change, particularly in global contexts.

It also became obvious to me that my previous global work experiences helped me to navigate the pandemic. Over the last three years, my personal demands (e.g., stress, identity transformation) decreased to some extent, as did my nonwork/private demands (e.g., work-family conflict, family adjustment in the foreign country, maintenance of friendships, work-life balance) but my work demands increased significantly (e.g., career transition concerns, structural and perceptual barriers). This led me to the next big question...

How do I tie my professional and personal lives together?

Further reflecting on me as an individual, I wanted to go deeper to understand how my work and personal life ties together. The more I pondered what impact my culture and global work experiences had on my workstyle and how my personal life impacted my leadership. I came across work by Greenhaus and Powell (2006) that focuses on the field of career development and work-family interface. According to their theory, positive experiences and resources in one domain (work or family) can enhance an individuals' well-being and functioning in the other domain. For example, skills developed at work, such as time management or problem-solving, can be applied to family responsibilities, leading to improved well-being and effectiveness in both areas.

In order to restart study abroad programs we needed to 'check' and see what travel was like as the pandemic was subsiding. Any learnings we could take from this we could immediately feed back into the new programs and predeparture orientations, etc. I had to decide how we could make this decision about restarting and knew in my heart the only way was for me to travel internationally first (home to the U.K.) and then make a call on the safety measures that would need to be taken. At the same time, I had been unable to see my family for over two years as the borders had been closed, therefore, I knew that if I could travel and see them even for a few days, it would tie work and professional experiences and have beneficial effects on my psychological wellbeing, ultimately making me better at my job.

There were several reasons why I thought that this was the best approach. Firstly, I thought it would show the principle of leading by example. I could build credibility and trust among my team, and I could influence and motivate them. In addition, I would be better placed to overcome resistance or skepticism as some colleagues were resistant to change or skeptical about whether it was safe to travel internationally. However, by demonstrating the desired behaviors first, it showed that I believed in the value of the change and was willing to personally invest in it, making it easier for my colleagues to embrace and adopt the proposed changes.

4.6. Philosophical Differences in Mindset

While I was reacting to the pandemic, I could acutely see the differences in mindset that could have been brought about by culture. Japan tends to have a more collectivist mindset, emphasizing the importance of cooperation and community. During the pandemic there was a strong sense of collective responsibility with individuals following guidelines and prioritizing the welfare of the group without stringent legal measures. In the UK, there is a more individualistic culture placing greater emphasis on personal freedom and rights which can lead to a more diverse range of approaches to the pandemic, but people were forced to adhere to laws. In Japan, the people took more self-responsibility. As a result, as a non-Japanese, I felt uncomfortable at times taking strong leadership in a culture that usually required more collaborative decision making. I realize that my leadership style can be seen as being too dominant, domineering and individualist at times even though I am attempting to include everyone. Making decisions at speed called for this type of dominant leadership.

The fact that Japan is a more risk-averse culture, valuing stability and caution was apparent in my interactions with senior management. I think I naturally have a greater acceptance of risk and a willingness to embrace change. This may be why I was able to be more adaptative and flexible in my response to the pandemic.

One other philosophical difference is that Japan traditionally has long-term orientation and cultural emphasis on thinking and planning, which is often referred to as ‘*enryo*’³ or self-restraint. In the UK there tends to be a stronger inclination towards short-term thinking and seeing immediate solutions and results, and I could see this reflected in my leadership style being more reactionary. I attempted to balance the actions with the students emotional and economic concerns. But of course, these observations are broad generalizations and individual attitudes and beliefs can vary between country, but by reading about these differences as I went through the process, I could begin to understand why some things were successful and some things weren’t.

5. Conclusion

The main takeaway from this autoethnographic exercise was a development in my understanding of leadership identity and transformational leadership. First, I have evolved to think of myself as a transformational *leader-manager*. I observed that I possess both leadership and management qualities and combine them in my role. I tried to inspire and share vision as well as showing my organizational and operational skills to achieve success. Transformational leadership is an ongoing journey, requiring commitment and growth. At the time of writing, I don’t know if I will remain in this position in the future or whether I will be moved to another section of the university but the skills I have gained through this experience will surely be useful in a variety of contexts. This process has taught me how to be adaptable, receptive to feedback, and willing to refine my approach when I navigate challenging situations. I would urge any academic administrator to explore their leadership style and to take time to reflect on their approaches. To work out your leadership style you need to know your values as your values are yardsticks of your behavior.

Secondly, I realize we need to identify our weaknesses and not to be afraid of them. Ask for feedback from your colleagues to identify your strengths and weaknesses. Assess your ability to delegate (this is one area I need to work on if I am to continue as a director), and finally, observe other leaders around you. Look for inspiration, seek out role models and mentors to guide your journey. The only way you can truly understand your leadership style is to assess your personality, be vulnerable with others, and continually reflect.

Of course, there are limitations to this autoethnography. It is only half the story; how I perceived, made sense of, and identified with my leadership. It does not include the thoughts, feelings, and sensemaking of my team. In conducting this autoethnography I seek to encourage other professionals who manage educational activities to consider how their position, power, and influence may encourage or hinder the development of their international programs and the experiences of their students. I also urge practitioners to explore autoethnography as a research tool, particularly in leadership contexts; the more we can share our vulnerability and stories, the more we can learn and grow as a community.

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³ The original meaning is to behave with modesty, to be reserved, to be humble or to hesitate.

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