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Kobe University’s
Short-term Overseas Study Tour Programs
Looking back, looking forward

Tim Greer

1. Introduction
Established in 2004 with a mission to coordinate the university’s general foreign language classes, the School of Languages and Communication (SOLAC) at Kobe University has been organizing and implementing short-term overseas study tours since its inception. In conjunction with the university’s partner institutions in Australia, Austria, China, France and the United States, to date there have been a total of 19 programs run with more than 340 students participating over the last five years.

Overseas exchange trips have become a staple part of the Japanese university experience (Umakoshi, 1997) Such programs typically give first and second year students their first taste of life in another country (Taylor 2004) and have been viewed as an initial step in the Japanese travel life cycle (March, 2000). The participants in SOLAC’s programs study the language of the host country and experience the daily lives of the people who live there, either through homestays or by living in student dormitories. In the main, the short-term study tour programs fall under the responsibility of the Research Section for Supporting Academic Exchange (学術交流支援研究部), but in fact all members of SOLAC have been involved in their management over the years, whether as tour organizers or as accompanying faculty.

Given that the tours have become a large part of SOLAC’s duties, it is worth taking a retrospective look at each of the programs, as well as scrutinizing their prospects for the future. To this end, a symposium on the short-term study tour programs was held on November 12th, 2008, which was coordinated by the author and included the following six panelists:

- Chris Gilman, Director of English Language Programs, University of Washington
- Luke Rungie, Development Officer, University of Melbourne
- Ding Anqi, Associate Professor, Beijing University of Foreign Languages
- Masanori Suzuki, Senior Test Developer, Pearson Knowledge Technologies, USA
- Stefan Fukada-Trummer, Associate Professor, SOLAC, Kobe University
- Yoshio Miki, Dean and Professor, SOLAC, Kobe University

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Over two hundred people attended the panel, bringing together a broad range of program stakeholders, including SOLAC faculty members and staff, representatives from partner institutions, researchers, travel providers, and the undergraduate university students who participate in these programs.

This report documents the discussions that were held at that symposium. The panel reflected on the successes and challenges SOLAC has experienced in organizing these programs, discussing the goals for each program, and how Kobe University students measure up in terms of those goals. Since there is a considerable amount of time and money dedicated to these overseas study tours, it is worth reflecting on what students gain from short-term language programs, and what can be done in order to ensure they get the most out of their experiences abroad. These and other questions will be the focus of this report.

2. Looking Back: An overview of the programs to date

This section will briefly sketch out the various programs that SOLAC developed and participated in conjunction with its overseas partner institutions between 2004 and 2008, providing an overview of the various programs. These will then be taken up in greater detail in later sections.

A summary of the five short-term language programs supported by SOLAC is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Overview of SOLAC’s short-term overseas language study tours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target language</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Partner institution</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Short-term Chinese Program</td>
<td>Beijing Foreign Studies University</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>German Language Program</td>
<td>Graz University</td>
<td>Graz</td>
<td>Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>French Intensive Course</td>
<td>University of Franche-Comté</td>
<td>Besançon</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Intercultural Studies Australia (ISA)</td>
<td>University of Melbourne</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Short-term English Program (STEP)</td>
<td>University of Washington</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOLAC’s role in these programs varies. Some of the programs exist independently of SOLAC and therefore pre-date Kobe University’s involvement. In these cases, Kobe University students
generally take classes alongside students from other countries. In other cases, the partner institution implements a dedicated program which has been planned exclusively for Kobe University students, and often this means that SOLAC faculty members are able to negotiate aspects of the curriculum and associated events, in order to cater for the particular needs of KU students.

SOLAC has been supporting these programs since the 2004 academic year, when it first sent groups to Australia and China and has since sent a total of 332 students to study with its partner institutions abroad. Table 2 provides a detailed year-by-year breakdown of the number of student that have participated in each program. Figure 1 presents the same data in a bar graph.

Table 2 Number of participants in the overseas study tours (Academic years 2003-2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graz</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franche-Comté</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne²</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>332</td>
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</table>

As can be seen, the two English programs are by far the best attended, accounting for seventy

² These figures are for the Japanese academic year, which finishes in March. Since the Melbourne study tour is held during the spring vacation (February/March), these figures relate to students who actually attended the ISA program during the following calendar year.
percent of the overall student participation. The programs also appear to be more popular with female students, with roughly one male participant for every four females across the programs. These figures would seem to be in line with nationwide trends.

In general, the programs take place during the Japanese summer break, in either August or September. Since there are two English programs, one is held in summer (at the University of Washington) and the other is held in the spring break in February/March (at the University of Melbourne). Each program ranges from three to four weeks, and a SOLAC faculty member usually accompanies the students for at least part of the time they are abroad.

Naturally there are some steep costs involved in the programs, and these are largely borne by the participating students themselves. The graph in Figure 2 depicts the changes in each program’s costs over the past five years.

![Figure 2: Changes in the cost of each program (2004-2008)](image)

As can be seen from this graph, the costs vary greatly between the five programs. The difference reflects a combination of factors, including the rising cost of plane fares and fuel surcharges, increases in the cost of living which impacts on the homestay and accommodation charges and in-built rises in the cost of tuition for the program.

SOLAC does its best to keep the costs of the programs down for the students. Largely in cooperation with the Seikyo Travel provider, SOLAC organizes airline arrangements, visa requirements and accommodation details for each group. SOLAC applies for funding for the accompanying faculty members’ costs on an annual basis via the Kobe University International Exchange Fund. This helps keep costs down for the programs, but there is a need for the university to recognize the value of these programs by committing to a more established means of funding to support them.

An online questionnaire was given to those who took part in the summer overseas study tours in
2008 (n=35). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the survey revealed that those participating in the German and Chinese trips were satisfied with the cost of the programs, but the English and French programs were judged too expensive by a large number of the students who took part in them (see Figure 3). SOLAC aims to make these programs accessible to as many students as possible by keeping the costs down, but in reality this can be quite difficult to accomplish.

![Figure 3: Student evaluations on the cost of the summer programs (2008)](image)

Sections 3 to 7 below will give a brief outline of each of the five short-term overseas language study tours.

3. The ISA Program at Melbourne University
The Intercultural Studies Australia (ISA) Program at the University of Melbourne is jointly coordinated by the Australian Centre and the School of Languages and Linguistics, which are both based in the Faculty of Arts. This three week program is held during the spring vacation, between February and March each year, which is the end of southern summer.3 Students stay with homestay families for the duration of the program, and participate in classes during the week, consisting of English language classes, excursions, lectures and other cultural activities. The program aims to provide students with immersive exposure to Australian language and culture, as well as give them opportunities to engage with a wide variety of people so that they gain confidence and skills in intercultural communication. This section will provide an outline of the structure and goals of the ISA program, as well as reflect on the benefits that the program offers students, and ways in which it can be strengthened in the future.

3 In the 2007 and 2008 academic years, this program was run in conjunction with the PEP3 program. The two additional groups (29 and 21 students respectively) went to Melbourne at the same time as the ISA group, but studied a different course.
The curriculum consists of a mix of language and culture, incorporating aspects of each into each class. Each weekday morning the students spend around three hours with experienced native English speaking teachers in informal class environment that focuses particularly on developing their conversational skills. In addition, the students have the opportunity to listen to lectures given by full-time academics from the Faculty of Arts on such topics as Australian History, Aboriginal culture and Multiculturalism. The curriculum is supplemented with regular excursions and field trips, during which the students can see the culture in action. These are usually linked to classroom activities as well. A typical activity, for example, might consist of interviewing someone at the markets about their family history, and then reporting the content of the interview back to the class in an informal presentation. Another highlight of the program for the student is the “bush camp”, a two-night stay in the Australian countryside.

Students consistently rate the homestay experience highly, and SOLAC considers it an integral part of both English study-abroad tours. This immersive exposure helps make English come alive for the students, giving them first-hand insight into the ways that the language is used in the daily lives of people in Australia. It also becomes an extension of the ISA approach to reducing the formality of English learning and encouraging students to experiment with the English they have already acquired. The students who get the most out of the program are invariably those who are willing to take risks with the language and are not afraid to make mistakes.

The question of whether or not students’ spoken English will really improve over such a short overseas stay is one that is very valid. To this end, Yokokawa, Yabuuchi, Suzuki and Morishita, (2006) conducted a study of the cohort that attended the ISA program in that year. Using the Versant for English test, they found that the programs may indeed help develop certain spoken English skills, particularly response time and syntactic processing speed. They hypothesized that the study abroad program forced students to react to spoken stimuli in a more timely fashion; the sort of skills that increase a learner’s spoken fluency. Although we have ample anecdotal evidence of the students’ improvement, it is important to continue this sort of quantifiable approach in the future. Not only the students, but our overseas partner institutions as well have expressed interest in the results of this research, since they tend to suggest that even a three week stay abroad can have an impact on a student’s English fluency.

4. The STEP Program at the University of Washington

Over the past five years, students from almost every faculty of Kobe University have attending the Short Term English Programs (STEP), which are offered by the English Language Programs (ELP) section of the University of Washington (UW). While this organization also offers a variety of long and short-term academic English courses, STEP is a fluency program, and like the ISA program in Melbourne is based around a three-week program intensive program that combines both language and cultural experiences. From 2008 the afternoon out-of-class activities have become optional. Many take advantage of the many activities that are on offer on and around
UW’s Seattle campus. These are generally free or cost very little, such as canoeing, volleyball or bowling.

The in-class activities aim to progress the students’ oral English skills, providing extensive speaking and listening practice and vocabulary building activities. Discussions are often developed around intercultural topics which take advantage of the fact that the Kobe students sit for these classes alongside students from other countries, including near-neighbors like Korea and China. The teachers emphasize a range of conversational strategies and students take part in a group study project that involves conducting out-of-class interviews with local people in Seattle and culminates in a presentation of their findings.

Accommodation on this program is also by homestay, but this is not provided by the university. Instead, SOLAC employs the services of a specialist company based in Seattle, Intercultural Homestay & Services Inc. This company arranges the host families, meets the students at the airport and takes care of them outside of class for the three weeks they are in the USA. In general the students were happy with this arrangement as it is an ideal way of using their English in real-life situations.

On the whole the students were satisfied with the programs, but a small number of participants rated the UW program poorly, citing the expense, the homestay experience and the relatively large number of Japanese on the program as aspects they would like to see improved in the future. Figure 4 gives a comparative depiction of the students’ feedback on the four summer programs, based on data collected in the 2008 survey.

\[\text{Figure 4: Students’ overall evaluations of the summer programs (2008)}\]
5. The Short-term Chinese Program at Beijing Foreign Studies University
Since 2004 SOLAC has been working in conjunction with Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) to offer a short term study program in Chinese program during the summer vacation. Given that the students have had far less prior exposure to Chinese as a foreign language, these programs have their own special needs and challenges. This section will provide an introduction to the short-term study programs that have been organized by the School of Chinese Language and Literature at BFSU.

BSFU is well-known throughout China for its specialization in the field of languages. BSFU has twelve schools and institutes and eight academic departments, made up of a teaching staff of over 600, including 330 professors and associate professors, 200 instructors and 180 native-speaking experts from around the globe.

Established in 1984, the School of Chinese Language and Literature has around 80 teachers, 33 of whom are full-time professors and associate professors. Adjunct to the School is the Chinese Training Center, which is responsible for both the long and short term Chinese programs for overseas students. It is here that the students from Kobe University study. The short term programs range from one to three weeks and include lessons that focus on both Chinese language and culture. The program includes a number of tours in and around Beijing, and students frequently venture further afield by themselves either on completion of the program.

In general the students take part in classes along with students from other countries and other Japanese universities, which makes for valuable exchange on top of that which takes place with the local Chinese people. The students are accommodated in dormitories throughout the program, and Prof. Zhu from SOLAC has taken an active role in establishing and facilitating the Chinese study tours.

6. The French Intensive Course at the University of Franche-Comté
Franche-Comté is an administrative region in eastern France. The province was originally known as the “Free County” of Burgundy, and has a population of 1,146,000. Situated in the regional capital of Besançon, the University of Franche-Comté is the venue for SOLAC’s short-term French language program, which is held in August at the Centre for Applied Linguistics (CLA). This centre is one of the highest ranking language teaching institutions in the world, with more than 70 tenured academics and over 3000 students studying there each year. They offer not only French but also a range of languages.

Students from Kobe University take part in the 100 hour Intensive French Course, which focuses on developing conversational skills using a variety of auditory and visual input. More than three hundred students from 48 countries attend the four-week summer course. It is also possible for students to remain for a longer period of study during the second semester, by going on to the 13 week intermediate course. On average each class consists of around thirteen students, ranked according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF)
guidelines. The students undergo a placement test on their arrival in order to determine the class into which they will be placed, however it is possible to request to change classes in cases where the student feels their ability does not match that of the class.

In the intensive course, students take 25 hours of classes per week, including an hour of independent study each day in the language laboratory. Field trips and expeditions (known as sortie pédagogique) are held each week on the Friday afternoon, allowing students to develop their language skills in practical tasks outside of class. The classes use a range of pedagogical techniques including dialogue roleplays, contextualized grammar practice, audiolingual listening tasks and group work.

The results of the questionnaire indicate that Kobe University students who participated in the French program are generally very satisfied with the program. One of the 2008 participants commented, “This program made me feel easier and more enjoyable to learn French, so I feel I can continue learning it from now on. In addition, I’m so happy because I could make some very precious friends, both Japanese and foreigners. I could meet many people from all over the world, Mexican, Chinese, Brazilians, Africans, Italians... and so on. It was [one of] the most interesting experiences in my life.”

7. The German Program at Graz University

The exchange program with Graz University is different in many aspects from the other study tours that SOLAC organizes, because it is not a "stay one month and go home" summer school. Graz University aims to encourage the students from Kobe University to stay for a longer term wherever possible. All classes are part of Graz University’s language curriculum and are run by the Center for Language Education, which offers many different languages throughout the academic year. The classes follow the European standards for language education. For each level several classes are offered, and usually not more than two or three students from Kobe are placed together into the same class.

The classes in September are designed represent an initial step in what will ultimately become for the students a more long-term commitment to studying in Austria. Although most students actually do not stay longer than one month, Graz University provides them with student IDs and registration numbers. This number remains with the student for their whole life and allows him or her to enter almost every major Austrian university at any time in the future. Associate Professor Stefan Fukada-Trummer of SOLAC emphasizes that this sets the Graz program apart from other “summer school” study tours.

So the Graz program is not just an exchange program between two universities. It represents an entrance into the European university system. Of the 19 students who took part in the 2008 program, three have decided to stay for longer periods of study and others may return in the future in order to take advantage of the fact that they are now eligible to study at European universities. The added value of this aspect of the Graz program should not be underestimated.
However, in order to give the students this bonus, there is no small amount of hard work required “behind the scenes”. Dr. Fukada-Trummer regularly travels to Graz prior to the students’ arrival in order to prepare the necessary paperwork so that the students can receive these registration advantages.

8. Looking forward: Challenges and directions for future programs

There has been much progress made, given that overseas study programs aimed at first and second year undergraduate students did not exist at Kobe University until five years ago. SOLAC has established and maintained valuable relationships with our partner institutions abroad, and in conjunction with them we have enabled many new students to develop their foreign language proficiency by studying and living in a target-language environment. All those who have been involved with the programs are justly proud of what they have achieved.

Yet there are still many challenges ahead. One of the biggest hurdles involves the ongoing administration of the programs, particularly the issue of the accompanying teacher. It is important for a representative of the SOLAC academic staff, preferably the organizer of each program, to accompany the students on their journey abroad. Even if the professor is unable to stay for the full duration of the program, it is extremely beneficial to have an experienced and responsible full-time academic from Kobe University to aid the students on their journey and to help them settle in to the program during the first week. For many of the students, these programs represent their first trip abroad, and so there is much the accompanying teacher can do to help them acclimatize. In fact, many times the accompanying teacher has actually played a pivotal role in preventing potentially disastrous situations, such as by intervening and translating at customs for a student who had forgotten his visa.

Up until now, the accompanying teacher’s travel expenses have been funded by Kobe University via its Kokusai Koryu Fund. However, SOLAC needs to apply for this money each year and, since this is done in competition with other faculties, there is no guarantee that the centre will be granted this funding. The university seriously needs to consider a more stable means of financially supporting these short-term overseas study tours if they are going to continue in the future.

Based on student feedback from the online survey, it appears that there is also a need to increase the amount and quality of interaction the Japanese students have with the local students in each program. Naturally there are plenty of opportunities to communicate with people in the host country while abroad, but it seems the Japanese students sometimes have difficulty taking advantage of this. Even when they stay in homestays, we often hear that they would have liked to talked to other people their own age more. Based on this sort of feedback some of the study-tours, such as the UW program, have incorporated free conversation sessions with local students into the schedule. However, this is not something that we consider to be solely the fault of the programs. To a certain degree, Japanese students need to take responsibility for their own overseas
experience, and seek out more opportunities to interact with the local students for themselves.

Despite all the time and hard work that they involve for the SOLAC faculty, ultimately these programs are always well received by the students who participate in them. It is difficult to quantify the success of the programs, but the tired yet satisfied faces of the students when they arrive home to Kansai Airport speak volumes about the wealth of valuable knowledge and experience they have acquired in their three weeks abroad.

References:

