

Australian Studies and the Australian Study Abroad Programme

Sonya Govey

Study abroad programmes offer students a rare opportunity to explore and immerse themselves in the culture and language of another country. The personal and national benefits of sending students abroad should not be underestimated. The English Department of Immaculate Heart College offers its students just such an experience: the chance to spend four weeks in Australia attending school and lodged with an Australian family. This college is perhaps unique in that our students are hosted by over twenty sister schools in Australia. In order to provide students with sufficient background knowledge of their host country, and the tools necessary to survive in a new environment, this paper outlines the Australian Studies I course offered to first year students.

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Programme Background

An integral part of the English studies programme offered by the English Department of Immaculate Heart College has been and continues to be the Australian Study Abroad Programme. This four week programme (originally five weeks) was conceived and set up by the founding Dean of English, an American, Mr Rowland Harker. The destination of both the inaugural (1979) and second (1980) trips was the USA, changing to Australia, however, in its third year of operation.

There were apparently two reasons for the destination switch from the USA to Australia. Firstly, the original American experience was similar to a commercial language school, whereby all students attended specially designed classes and were accommodated together in a dormitory. While the classroom learning experience was of a high standard, it was felt that the students were missing out on the unique cultural experience of living abroad. Their immersion into the American way of life was minimal. Secondly, the timing was not optimal. American universities were only able to offer such a programme during

* Kagoshima Immaculate Heart College, English Department, 4-22-1 Toso, Kagoshima-shi 890-8525, Japan

the summer vacation period. After only six months of college life, it was felt that our students were not yet ready for the challenges of an overseas study programme.

On account of Kagoshima city's sister city relationship with the Australian city of Perth, our college was visited in the late 1970s and early 1980s by teachers and students from a Perth-based private high school: St Norbert Catholic College. These visits were a part of their own overseas study programme. As a consequence of the disadvantages connected with the American programme, St Norbert was approached regarding the establishment of a homestay/study programme based around a number of high schools in Perth; and St Norbert agreed to take the lead in this. Various other high schools in the different state capital cities were personally visited by Mr Harker, and they also agreed to host our students. In this way, the number of schools involved in our programme peaked at over thirty in the 1990s. In recent years, the number of participating schools has declined. It has thus become necessary to send a small group of students to a Perth-based language school offering a homestay option. Because of the much higher cost factor associated with the language school fees, the language school only becomes an option when our participating high schools are not able to accept our full contingent of students.

The reasons for the declining interest among schools to receive our students, I believe, can be found in i) market-saturation and ii) a leveling off of interest in the Japanese language amongst Australian students.

i) During the 1980s and 1990s, Australian high schools eagerly sought out partner schools overseas, both to be able to send their own students on international exchange as well as to enrich their own educational environment when receiving foreign students. Today, though the benefits still exist, the realities of organization: finding safe and involved homestay families, organizing special programmes at school, caring for homesick students, dealing with host family/student conflict; and the business market have stepped in: many schools and homestay families are now involved in international exchange on a business for profit basis.

ii) The 1980s and 1990s was a boom period for Japanese studies at the Australian high school level but this has since leveled off. Two factors have contributed to this. Firstly, there has been a realization among students that the complexity of the language makes it difficult to obtain high matriculation grades and/or fluency; and secondly, the bursting of Japan's economic bubble has resulted in fewer students choosing to learn the language for career-related reasons.

Based on the rate of participation over the past several years, we expect to have approximately 22 high schools participating and, if needed, one independent language school (two campuses) hosting our students during the 2008 programme.

Expectations and Outcomes

Because of the short duration of their Australian stay, the expectation is that during that time, students will be able to practise and consolidate the knowledge they already possess of the English language. But perhaps more importantly, they will be exposed to the culture and traditions, both the original Anglo-Celtic and present-day multi-cultural, of one of the world's English speaking societies. It is not expected, in such a short period, that students would or should make marked progress in their understanding of more complex structures or develop a more sophisticated vocabulary.

The reality is that the majority of students, even those with weaker English language skills, return from Australia with a feeling of much greater confidence in what they can do, and a sense that English is indeed a useful communication tool. They have survived the unfamiliar, and at the same time put into use the knowledge they have spent the last seven years acquiring. Apart from the academic benefits, the growth in individual maturity stands out. This, too, is of obvious benefit as they commence their last year of studies and the quest to find a place in the work force. A key problem is to maintain that enthusiasm for English during their second year of studies. To stem this draining of interest various proposals have been put forward including, for example, the offer of a second study abroad trip during the summer of the 2nd year (as yet, not offered), but for many, the "hunt for jobs" during this period becomes paramount. However, this still does not detract from the obvious benefits the students have gained from participating in the programme.

Preparation for the Programme

Though not a compulsory requirement for graduation from this college, the Australian Study Abroad Programme remains a core component of the English Department curriculum. Students are strongly encouraged to participate. From a first year student body of between 70-80 students, on average, only two to three students each year will elect not to participate. It appears, however, that the number choosing not to participate will double for the 2008 Programme. Whether this will be a long-term trend or not remains to be seen.

With regard to the preparation of students for their four weeks in Australia, a number of things are done throughout their first year of studies:

- i) one year residence in St Mary's Hall to build communication and confidence skills*
- ii) the coordination of the core studies of speaking, writing, listening and vocabulary building with a focus on the Australian Study Abroad Programme
- iii) four detailed guidance sessions in Japanese for students and two meetings with parents and students
- iv) a one semester Australian Studies course in the second semester of 1st Year.**

*The Australian trip is tied in closely with the requirement that all first year students spend their first year of studies in a hall of residence, St Mary's Hall, in which the use of English on a daily basis is strongly encouraged. Three native English-speaking teachers are also resident to aid the students' acquisition of English language skills and cultural awareness.

**Academically, this course is compulsory for all students regardless of whether they intend to participate in the Study Abroad Programme to Australia or not.

Australian Studies I

The remainder of this paper will deal with the above-mentioned fourth point (point iv): the Australian Studies I course.

Since 1994 I have been directly involved, in some way, in the Australian Study Programme, either as an accompanying teacher/programme coordinator or in the preparation of the students. As such, I have learned a great deal about the programme from many different perspectives.

Regarding the Australian Studies I course, the present course material was put together and written by me. I also teach all the students. In this way, all students receive the same information; and, in particular, the essential knowledge regarding personal safety and responsibilities while abroad (this information being, in my opinion, of major importance). The students do not use a textbook; only the materials prepared by me, together with realia, CDs, DVDs, and information/picture books.

In its early years, the course tended to be more an academic oriented subject, containing a great deal of factual information, and emphasizing history, geography, famous

Australians and general cultural information. After speaking to colleagues and students, both during and after several trips, it became obvious that the course content was not totally meeting the needs of the students while abroad. One colleague in particular, Ms Yoshiko Tahara, conducted various surveys of the students and advised me early on of their concerns and opinions. Over the years, the course has become much more practical. The emphasis is now on providing:

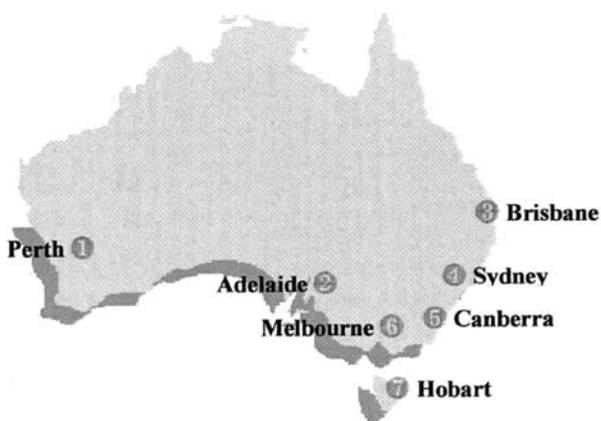
- i) a brief overview of Australia together with
- ii) survival information related specifically to the various cities, schools, and general homestay life (together with the above-mentioned issues of personal safety and individual responsibilities).

The following is an outline of the first part of the course:- a brief overview of Australia as mentioned in point i) above. This first part comprises approximately the first half of the semester course (8 lessons). The remainder of the course, point ii) above, (7 lessons) will be covered in a future paper.

A. Pre-course

During the summer vacation period prior to the commencement of the Australian Studies I course, students are encouraged to think about the Australian city to which they would like to be allocated. They may choose three cities, listed preferentially as 1st, 2nd and 3rd choices. There are seven possible destinations:

1. Perth
2. Adelaide
3. Brisbane
4. Sydney
5. Canberra
6. Melbourne
7. Hobart



Australia, map (Kagoshima: Taki Shobo, 2006)

Early in the second semester, each student indicates her three preferences. The city to which she will eventually be allocated is based on these preferences together with the number of places offered by the Australian schools, as well as teachers' assessment of the best combination of students attending a particular school. Teachers make the final decision on allocation. In order to be able to make a more informed choice, students are advised to do their own personal research using the visual/informative material provided for them in the student lounge as well as other sources such as the Internet.

B. Introduction to Cities, States and Climate

The various cities are the focus of the first two lessons. As each city has a variety of attractions, two factors are looked at more closely to help students in their destination choice: **population size and climate**. A video 'Discover Australia' (presenting all the cities) is shown along with a discussion of the population size of the various capital cities (Darwin is the only national/state/territory capital city not visited on the programme).

The students work in groups and are asked to first name and think about the spelling of the major Australian cities. Though it may appear basic, spelling is included because our students' pronunciation and knowledge of the place names is based on the Japanese 'katakana' sound system. We then proceed to look at the size of the cities after ascertaining the population of Kagoshima (600,000), which is more often than not completely unknown. The destination-cities can be grouped as:

- two very large cities: Sydney (4,100,000) and Melbourne (3,600,000)
- three large cities: Brisbane (1,800,000), Perth (1,400,000) and Adelaide (1,100,000)
- two smaller cities: Canberra (320,000) and Hobart (200,000)

In this way, students are able to consider for themselves the pros and cons of a stay in a large metropolis or in the quieter environment of a relatively small country city.

Throughout all lessons, I attempt to draw parallels with Japan or the students' own experiences. This facilitates a better comprehension and absorption of the new knowledge and provides them with facts and information they are often not aware of about their own society. It also provides them with possible topics and facts to include in their conversations with Australian host families and with their Australian peers.

Students receive a worksheet listing a few basic points about the capital cities (located inland/coast, attractions, climate in February/March) plus a map on which they need to

locate the cities. The information is to be read for homework, and the city names and locations are to be memorised. Though students would sometimes prefer to focus only on the cities in which they are interested, some general information is required to be known. Supplementing the above, the book boxes (containing multiple copies of Steve Parish picture/information books on all capital cities and general Australian information) are brought from the student lounge to class and used as visual aids and further sources of information.

In the second lesson, the basic political structure of states and territories is pointed out (and compared briefly with Japan's prefectural system). Students are required to remember the six state and two mainland territory names and also print these onto their Australian maps (mentioned above). State abbreviations are also mentioned as these appear in addresses, on immigration entry and departure cards, and on car number plates.

With regard to climate, we look at large colourful full-page, four-day weather forecasts (from 'The Australian' newspaper) collected during previous trips. The differences and similarities between the summers in Kagoshima and the Australian cities are pointed out. In general, Australian cities have a much greater diurnal temperature range, less humidity, periods of extreme heat, and greater changeability. The cooler Australian evenings and cooler rainy days are important when considering appropriate clothing to pack. As well as what to pack, students with medical conditions such as asthma and dermatitis are requested to think about climate suitability.

As a guide, Hobart is much cooler than the mainland cities, and can even be quite cold during the day. Adelaide and Perth have hot, dry Mediterranean climates. Brisbane is subtropical with a summer climate more similar to that of Kagoshima, while Melbourne and Sydney are rather changeable. Canberra has low humidity and is cooler at night because of its location in the highlands away from the coast.

C. Introduction to Geography and the Australian Flag

In the following two lessons we look, firstly, at distances and land mass. Many students have little idea of the actual size of the country they will be visiting, and sometimes even expect to be able to visit other capital cities, the Great Barrier Reef, or Uluru (Ayers Rock) without too much difficulty.

As an introduction, students are asked to estimate distances in Australia from east to west and north to south, based on distances in Japan (using flying time from Kagoshima to Tokyo). As a further aid to visualisation, and making use of their greater knowledge of

the United States of America, we also compare the size of the mainland USA and Australia. Visuals are shown superimposing Australia onto maps of both the mainland USA and Europe (no areas east of Poland), showing them all to be of similar size.

A worksheet compares the land mass data of Japan (380,000 sq km) and Australia (7,700,000 sq km) in figures, the highest mountains (Mt Fuji 3,776m and Mt Kosciusko 2,228m), and the respective populations (126 million and 20 million). These points are highlighted simply because of the comparative differences between the two countries.

Continuing on from this, students fill in a map of Australia indicating the following basic geographic and demographic features:

1. Desert areas
2. Great Dividing Range
3. Winter alpine areas
4. Great Barrier Reef
5. Uluru/Ayers Rock
6. Murray/Darling river system
7. Tropical north
8. Areas of greatest population density (east coast, south coast to Adelaide, Tasmania except the south-western corner, the south-western corner around Perth, and Darwin)

They also receive a reading comprehension sheet with missing information. This is a basic summary of the above-mentioned facts but also introduces other terms related to Australia such as 'Aussie', 'bush', 'station' (a large farm), and 'cyclone'.

Finally, we brainstorm Japanese symbols as an introduction to the topic of the Australian flag. What does it look like and what do the symbols represent? A real flag is displayed and we discuss the Commonwealth Star (an imaginary star, the seven points of which represent the six states and all the territories) and the Southern Cross (the star system most symbolic of the southern skies). At this point, the similarity with the flag of New Zealand is also mentioned. We also briefly think about famous stars in the northern skies such as the North Star 北極星 or the Big Dipper 北斗七星. Through this discussion, many students become interested in seeing the Southern Cross for themselves when they visit the southern hemisphere. Lastly, the inclusion of the Union Jack on the Australian flag to represent the British settlement of Australia in 1788* is mentioned. A worksheet is also provided as a summary of this information.

* Though there is also an Australian Aboriginal flag, I do not mention this in the first year course. This is covered in the second year course where, with a decreased risk of information overload and fewer time constraints, we discuss the Australian indigenous peoples in much greater depth.

D. Introduction to History

Though the majority of students seem to have little interest in history, the focus is not dates, people and specific events, but rather to try and show them why Australia is as it is today. The topic covers one to two lessons. Reading material is provided and students are encouraged to help each other with new vocabulary. Questions at the end of the reading are to ensure that students have an understanding of the most important developments, and their place in the Australian psyche today.

I have divided the history topic into:

1. Early History (Aborigines/Torres Strait Islanders)
2. European Discovery of Australia
3. European Settlement
4. Anglo-Celtic Background
5. Exploration
6. Gold Rushes
7. Farming
8. Australia's Foundation
9. Multi-cultural Australia
10. Australia and Japan*
11. 20th Century Wars
12. Other Events**

* Point 10: Australia and Japan – looks at not only the very close ties between Australia and Japan today, but also the enemy status of the two countries during World War II. This latter point is briefly discussed because of the almost complete lack of awareness among the students of the suffering inflicted on Australians (primarily Australian servicemen and women) at that time, and the consequent impact this has had on Australia's historical memory.

** Point 12: 'Other Events' – includes:

- i) female enfranchisement
- ii) foundation of QANTAS and the Flying Doctor Service
- iii) abolition of the death penalty
- iv) change in Asian immigration policy
- v) two Olympic Games
- vi) compulsory wearing of seat belts

These points have been included as they are:

- uniquely Australian, such as the Flying Doctor Service
- can be related to their homestay, eg. wearing of seat belts
- can be compared easily with Japan, eg. female franchise

None of the topics in Point 12 is covered in any significant detail.

E. Australian Wildlife

Apart from the landmark icons of Uluru/Ayers Rock and the Sydney Opera House, our students are most familiar with Australia's unique fauna, especially kangaroos and koalas. As many of them will visit zoos or wildlife parks during their homestay, we take a more comprehensive look at Australian wildlife.

Firstly, we brainstorm Japanese wildlife: what animal and birdlife do the students associate with the Japanese archipelago? We then move on to Australian fauna. Together with a perusal of the numerous books on wildlife from the students' lounge, there are three worksheets to be read. Brief descriptions of the following animals are given:

- kangaroos and wallabies
- koalas
- wombats
- possums
- Tasmanian devils and the extinct Tasmanian tiger
- platypuses
- echidnas
- dingos

The birds are:

- emus
- black swans
- parrots (cockatoos, rosellas, lorikeets, galahs, and budgerigars)
- kookaburras
- magpies

The final section deals with more dangerous animals:

- crocodiles (saltwater and freshwater)
- lizards (goannas and frilled neck lizards)
- snakes
- spiders (red-back and funnel web)

These animals and birds were selected for discussion as they are:

- more likely to be seen in the wild or in a zoo while in Australia
- likely to be talked about by their Australian host families.

Snakes and spiders form a part of the discussion because of the need for students to be aware of their existence, and thus take extra care when in the outdoors.

F. An Australian Folk Song

The final general topic before commencing the more homestay specific topics in the latter part of the course is Australia's best-known folk song: 'Waltzing Matilda'. We look at this song in detail because it is one of Australia's most famous cultural icons. Host families and new school friends are often impressed to find our students already familiar with, and able to perform, this traditional song.

To introduce this topic, students are asked, firstly, to identify which Japanese song they would select to sing or teach to Australians, if asked to do so. Through constant referral back to their own culture, students slowly become aware of the fact that they will be playing a role as cultural ambassadors while abroad, something many of them have thought very little about up to this point.

From there, we go on to learn to sing the first verse and chorus, and look at the meaning of the song. After discovering the lyrics are about stealing a sheep and committing suicide, students understand why 'Waltzing Matilda' was not chosen as Australia's national anthem. Students also make note of the existence of Australian English as opposed to standard English through the use of words such as:

- billabong: a waterhole in or near a river
- jumbuck: a sheep
- billy: a container for heating tea over an open fire
- tucker: food
- swagman: an itinerant worker in the 19th and early 20th centuries

Though we do not learn Australia's national anthem, 'Advance Australia Fair', the melody and rhythm of which are markedly different from Japan's 'Kimigayo', we do listen to it on CD.

Conclusion

The Australian Study Abroad Programme has a long and successful history at this college. It is the aim of this department to maintain the excellence of the programme.

The above Australian Studies I syllabus has changed considerably over the years, and continues to change as new feedback is received and incorporated into the course content. In the general information section (A-F) as outlined above, one of the biggest changes has been to eliminate a great deal of detailed factual information. The principal reason for this being to avoid information overload, and to provide students with a clear overall picture rather than a piece-meal knowledge of minor facts.

As mentioned before, the above topics are covered during approximately eight lessons. The remainder of the semester is devoted to more homestay specific topics: assignment on the allocated city, education (both high schools and language school), money and valuables, telephoning, swimming safety, luggage, homestay life, personal safety and responsibilities, college rules/host family & host school expectations. These topics will be dealt with in more detail in a future paper.

Class Resource Materials

The following is a list of Steve Parish class resource materials (multiple copies available for student use):

Steve Parish Publishing: www.steveparish.com.au

Amazing Facts about Australia

Amazing Facts about Australian Birds

Amazing Facts about Australian Landscapes

Amazing Facts about Australian Mammals

Amazing Facts about Australia's Heritage

Amazing Facts about Australia's Southern Skies

A Souvenir of Australian Landscapes

A Souvenir of Blue Mountains: Australia

A Souvenir of Sunshine Coast: Australia
Australia: A Steve Parish Guide
Australia: Giant Discovery Wall Map
Australia's National Parks
Birds Australia
Canberra: A Picture Book
Encyclopedia of Australian Wildlife
Gold Coast: Australia
Landscape Australia
Souvenir of Adelaide
Souvenir of Melbourne
Souvenir of Brisbane
Souvenir of Perth
Souvenir of Queensland
Souvenir of Sydney
Souvenir of Tasmania
Souvenir of Victoria
Souvenir of Western Australia
Souvenir of Wildflowers
Wildlife Australia

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