Short-term Programs in Japan: The Outlook for the Future

by Peter B. Oblas

Last year only slightly over 1,000 American students studied in Japanese universities while in recent years, between 40,000 and 50,000 Japanese students annually enroll in American institutions of higher learning.1 In response to this situation, the Japanese and U.S. governments, in cooperation with private and public educational institutions and groups, are attempting to stimulate American student interest in Japanese studies and in Japan as an educational destination. Japanese university short-term abroad programs for foreign students are still in the foundation stage, and stress firsthand experience, or understanding and friendship, rather than academic rigor.

A continuing dialogue among U.S. and Japanese teachers and administrators on sister school relations and reciprocal exchanges will be required to further develop on-site classes and study tours in Japan. The objective should be to enhance learning, not only about Japanese culture, but also about the Asia-Pacific region from Japan’s vantage point. There is a need to balance the goodwill principles of internationalization or intercultural exchange with well-defined academic goals. A substantial increase in student flows from the U.S. to Japan will not occur overnight. Still, any stimulus that promotes academic studies in Japan for American students is a positive development for educational globalization and Asian studies in the U.S.

Perhaps the best way to obtain some perspective on prospects for expanding U.S. student flows into Japan is to consider the student pull into Japan.1 At most ten weeks and, as such, can be highly oriented toward enhancing the awareness and appreciation of the host culture. In contrast, many U.S. university faculty generally believe that one year programs should be more closely tied to the regular curriculum of the sending school.

At Tsukuba University, in addition to Japanese culture courses, students are allowed to choose courses from over twenty major degree program courses in the fields of international relations, law, history, economics, psychology, and education.6 These courses existed prior to the short-term program and have not been custom-tailored to fit the educational objectives of the American students. The raison d’être for including such courses is that they are taught in English. Regarding the future of the curriculum, Hosono Akio, of Tsukuba University, believes that stress should be on intercultural communication in that “issues with international or transnational dimensions in which both Japanese and foreign students are strongly interested could be recommended” for active debate.7

The understanding that the outstanding pull for U.S. students into these new programs lies within the intercultural communication parameters does strike a responsive chord among American educators with a strong interest in international cooperation. Richard Wood, Chairman of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission and President of Earlham College, believes expanding cultural linkages are reason enough to support MOE’s initiative. For Wood, the future of junior-year-abroad in Japan should be the following: “The focus of program expansion needs to be on undergraduate education, concentrating on cultural learning and cultural understanding, on creating significant numbers of leaders of the future who can see behind stereotypes, who have a greatly increased capability to understand how things look from the other side, and how the other side functions. These people need language skills, but not at the same level or same type as academic specialists.”8

Aside from its student pull possibilities, an emphasis on the Japanese living experience does facilitate U.S. exchange because it addresses academic calendar problems. Academic years in Japan run from April to February, while in the U.S., September to June is the norm. The Kyushu program seeks to reproduce the U.S. schedule to some extent in that the short-term first semester begins in October and the second

Peter Oblas is Professor of International Relations at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and author of Perspectives on Race and Culture in Japanese Society: The Mass Media and Ethnicity.
semesters such as the Fukuoka symposium, is
imperative. International education flows are
defined to a significant extent by sister-
school agreements of student exchange
within the Japanese national university
system. Short-term programs have therefore
been linked from the beginning to sister
universities. Consequently, if flows are to be
increased, it will be necessary for host and
sending institutions to synchronize their
agendas. In view of the diversity of sister-
school agreements, a common agenda
would best be realized if the short-term
program is designed to have a somewhat
universal appeal to satisfy the strengths of
both institutions. Such an appeal, in turn,
would be realized most effectively if the
core curriculum is interdisciplinary.
Interdisciplinary studies, e.g., area,
development, international or education,
could include firsthand experience and also be suf-
iciently flexible to allow for multiple inter-
facing with courses offered in the various
departments of the sister universities. In this
respect, credit transfer will be facilitated, and
the award of a special joint certificate can be
negotiated between the national university
and its foreign sister school to be applied to
the student’s four-year or graduate degree.

Presently, the social sciences draw
the largest proportional number of foreign stu-
dents to Japanese national universities. The
University of California Education Abroad
Program, which sent 446 students to Japan
from 1990 to 1995, listed 57.6 percent as
social science majors. Therefore, with pro-
grams such as area, development, interna-
tional or education studies, one can link up
with a fundamental network of student flows
consisting of linguistics, economics, political
science, sociology, and history majors, as
well as service career options for students in
such fields as economic development, public
administration, or adult education.

There is a need for a dialogue between
sister schools and enabling organizations cen-
tering on a structural reorientation of the
short-term programs. Cultural immersion
would remain, but within an interdisciplinary
program framework. A short-term program
in development studies, for instance, would
focus on the economic development of mod-
ern Japan, comparative development in Asia,
and the Asian context of development
education. Future growth for U.S.-Japan edu-
cational exchange depends on the availability
and quality of this type of curriculum.

Below are four Japanese universities that are
interested in making connections with foreign
institutions regarding short-term student ex-
changes:

| Division of Foreign Student Affairs |
| University of Tsukuba |
| 1-1-1 Temnodai |
| Tsukuba-shi, Ibaraki 305 Japan |

| International Student Division |
| Hiroshima University |
| 1-4-5 Kagamiyama |
| Higashi-Hiroshima-shi |
| Hiroshima 739 Japan |

| International Student Exchange Division |
| Tokyo University of Foreign Studies |
| 4-51-21 Nishigahara |
| Tokyo 114 Japan |

| International Student Division |
| Osaka University |
| 1-1 Yamadaoka, Suita-shi |
| Osaka 565 Japan |