

# Chapter 8

## International Distance Education in the Asia Pacific: The Gifu JR Station Course

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter outlines the history and development of an international distance learning relationship, which was established between an Australian and Japanese university. In 2002, the University of Sydney, Australia and Gifu University in Japan established a lecture exchange program whereby live lectures would be transmitted through Web-based video conferencing. Further development of the relationship resulted in an additional three-year program whereby an entire course, consisting of weekly live lectures transmitted from Australia, was offered not only to local university students but citizens of Gifu city. An empirical account outlines the origin and purpose of this course, analyzes its success, discusses pedagogical and cultural issues and challenges that arose, and makes recommendations for further development. The final section of the chapter suggests possible future directions, including a theoretical model for worldwide international distance education.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper will outline the history and development of an international distance learning relationship, which was established between an Australian and Japanese university. In 2002 the University of Sydney, Australia and Gifu University in Japan established a lecture exchange program whereby live lectures would be transmitted through web-

based video-conferencing. Lectures on Australian studies were to be transmitted from the University of Sydney. Lectures on Japanese language and culture were to be transmitted from Gifu University. The Australian and Japanese students would thus be exposed to specialist teaching in a cross-cultural learning environment.

This lecture exchange, as a teaching and learning initiative, was the only one of its kind.<sup>1</sup>

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The National Institute of Multimedia Education (NIME), a Japanese government agency dedicated to research and development in e-learning and distance education in the tertiary sector, reported that the relationship between Gifu and Sydney universities was the only institution-to-institution program of distance learning between a Japanese and an overseas university (NIME Research Report 15, 2006).

Further development of the relationship resulted in an additional three-year program whereby an entire course, consisting of weekly live lectures transmitted from Australia, was offered not only to local university students but citizens of Gifu city. The distance education course was the length of one semester and in accordance with Japanese requirements, consisted of fifteen classes, each of ninety minutes duration. A course in Australian Studies, it was delivered from the University of Sydney, Australia, using live video-conferencing transmissions. It was managed by Gifu University and open to university students. However it was also made available to citizens of Gifu city, through the involvement of the Gifu Local Government. Through such engagement with the local community, adults outside of university had the opportunity to learn about the history, culture and society of Australia.

The so-called “Gifu JR Station Course” was an example of international distance education within the Asia-Pacific region that used web-based video-conferencing to provide tuition in the disciplines of foreign (English) language tuition and Area studies. An empirical account will outline the origin and purpose of the course, analyze its success, discuss pedagogical and cultural issues and challenges that arose, and make recommendations for further development.

From our perspective, there is a need for more international distance learning in Japan. However, there is also a need, and an ethical responsibility, for the benefits of distance learning to be shared in what is an increasingly connected world. The final section of this paper will suggest possible

future directions, including a theoretical model for worldwide international distance education.

## **BACKGROUND**

The international distance learning project involved the exchange of lectures between the Faculty of Education of Gifu University and the University of Sydney’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Live lectures were transmitted through audio-visual links. From October 2002 and throughout 2003, trial lecture transmissions were conducted using both ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) dial-up circuits and IP (Internet Protocol) links. The latter proved to be both effective and cost-efficient. In March of 2004 an agreement was formally signed between Gifu University’s Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney for the continuing provision of such lectures. Each year lectures on Japanese language and culture were transmitted from Gifu University and incorporated into Japanese studies courses for Sydney University students. Lectures in Australian studies were transmitted from Sydney to Gifu University and incorporated into existing courses in cross-cultural communication and English as a foreign language. The aim was to give the students of each university a chance to acquire new knowledge or different perspectives through live video-conferencing lectures sent from abroad.

Originally this project started in April 2002 between the Gifu Prefectural Government and Gifu University in order to fulfil the mission initiated by the former governor of Gifu Prefecture, Mr Kajiwara. He had previously established the Gifu International Network University Consortium, a virtual university of online courses run by seventeen local universities and colleges.<sup>2</sup> But an important part of the whole plan was not functioning. His initial idea had included international courses but none as yet existed. Thus in April 2002, Gifu University was commissioned

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