

Consul-General of Japan in Sydney's Newsletter

No. 36 Australia-Japan school exchange: "Tomodachi 2021" program leads to further expansion

19 March 2021

Australia has the largest number of people studying Japanese language of any country in the world on a per capita basis. What do you think the number one motivation is for students to study Japanese?

I am sure that the answer varies from person to person, but when observing Japanese language classes, I felt that exchange between Japanese and Australian schools is a particularly strong motivation. In many of the Japanese classes I visited, the rooms were decorated with photos showing students enjoying themselves on school trips in Japan and with posters covered in letters received from the Japanese school that students visited during exchange. Of course that would be great motivation! It's when you first have direct contact with a country's culture and have a true reason to use the language that you think, "I'm glad I studied it!" Particularly for children, engaging in exchange with people of their own age, who they may become friends with, will leave the strongest impression.

Unfortunately, since last year, mutual visits between Japanese and Australian schools had to stop due to COVID-19. However, there is a new initiative that will take place from April to July this year ahead of the Tokyo Olympics called Australian Olympic Connect | Tomodachi 2021 (hereafter "Tomodachi 2021"), an online exchange program between schools in Japan and Australia. Registration for schools interested in participating in the program opened recently. This initiative will lead to actual mutual visits post-COVID. In this issue of my newsletter, while introducing the "Tomodachi 2021" program, I invite you to join me in thinking about the development of school exchange between Japan and Australia in the future.



**Pilot program video-conference (Japanese and Australian students,
BMX freestyler Ms Saya Sakakibara and me)
(31 October 2020)**

● The success of the pilot program

The Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) first thought of the idea for this online school-exchange program at the start of last year and began making preparations. While the COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of the Olympics themselves, the Tomodachi pilot program instead went ahead.

The pilot program was held from 24 August to 31 October and approximately 1,500 students participated from 40 primary and high schools (20 Japanese schools and 20 Australian schools). The schools chosen to participate in the program were those that were already undertaking exchange such as with sister schools and schools from Host Towns¹. Using various online tools that quickly became ubiquitous due to COVID-19, individual schools engaged in a variety of exchange activities while receiving advice from the AOC – activities included video-conferences between students and the sharing of short videos created by students.

¹ Local towns in Japan that are hosting Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic athletes

On 31 October, I also took part in a Tomodachi video-conference between Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College (Alice Springs) and Mino-Jiyu Gakuen (Toyonaka City, Osaka Prefecture). Japanese-Australian, Ms Saya Sakakibara, who is an Olympic hopeful in freestyle BMX, accepted the invitation to take part and the students enthusiastically used their English and Japanese in a Q&A session.

After reviewing the responses to questionnaires answered by all schools and students that took part in the program, the organisers were surprised by just how positive the feedback was. Specifically, all schools that took part in the Tomodachi 2020 pilot program wanted to take part in the main Tomodachi 2021 program; all schools wished to continue and develop their relationship with the same school they had been paired with; and all teachers said they would recommend the program to teachers at other schools.

Taking the success of the pilot program onboard, the AOC decided to increase the number of participating schools in the main program ten-fold and are aiming to include 400 schools (200 Japanese schools and 200 Australian schools).



THE AUSTRALIAN OLYMPIC CONNECT PROGRAM CONNECTING AUSTRALIAN AND JAPANESE SCHOOLS TO CELEBRATE THE SHARED OLYMPIC VALUES AHEAD OF THE TOKYO GAMES.

From the pamphlet for the “Tomodachi 2021” program
(February 2021)

- **“Tomodachi 2021” applications open to schools**

The main program will finally take place from 19 April until 23 July, the day of the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony. Applications for schools interested in participating opened on 22 February and will close on 19 April (TBC). Up to this point in time, many Australian schools have registered their interest and I hope that Japanese schools will match them in number.

(For registrations/applications, see: <https://aoc.tfaforms.net/13/>)

Schools targeted by the program are schools with students aged between 10 and 16, and Australian schools which teach Japanese, Japanese schools which teach English. Individual classes must register, and at any one school, a maximum of 4 classes may apply.

Schools will be matched based on student age and year level (matching takes place from 1 to 19 April). Teachers supervising the classes are introduced to each other and contact details exchanged. All the Australian teachers have excellent Japanese (!), so Japanese teachers can relax and easily communicate with their counterparts. From the start to the end of the exchange period (19 April - 23 July), classroom teachers will get in touch with their counterparts about once every two

weeks. In addition, the AOC will support them by providing a “communication guide” to facilitate smooth planning of exchange activities.



Mr John Coates AC, President of the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), speaking during the webinar held upon the opening of “Tomodachi 2021” applications (22 February 2021)

● Webinar inviting applications for “Tomodachi 2021”

On 22 February, immediately after my return from Darwin (the topic of my previous newsletter), applications opened for “Tomodachi 2021” and a webinar was held for schools interested in registering for the online exchange program. Participants in the webinar included many high-level stakeholders involved in establishing and supporting the program, and around 150 people took part.

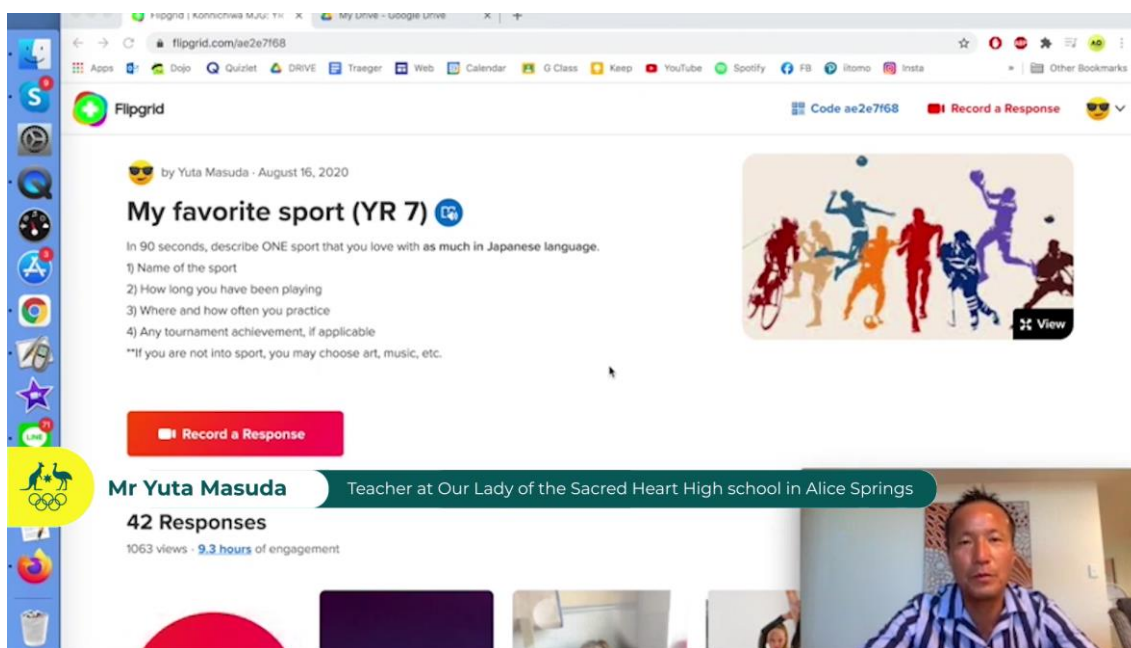
At the start of the webinar, there was a speech by Mr John Coates AC, President of the AOC and Chair of the IOC Coordination Commission for Tokyo 2020. Mr Coates explained that the name “Tomodachi” was chosen to signify the ties of friendship and deep exchange between Japan and Australia and he emphasized the significance of bringing together the students of Japan and Australia.

A video message from the Ambassador of Australia to Japan Jan Adams AO PSM was played, and the Ambassador of Japan to Australia Yamagami Shingo also gave a presentation. Ambassador Adams stated that “It’s a challenging time for people around the world, but this era has created some new opportunities for us to communicate and connect” and that she hoped students would create new friendships online. Ambassador Yamagami looked forward to future developments, saying “there is no doubt that activities through this educational program will lead to subsequent exchanges between the students and has the potential to inspire their future paths in life”.

In addition, Chiba-sensei from Mino-jiyu Gakuen in Osaka Prefecture and Masuda-sensei from Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Alice Springs (NT), who both participated in the pilot program, explained specific methods and results from their online exchange. At the end of the webinar, BMX freestyler Saya Sakakibara appeared and encouraged teachers and students to take part.

On the day of the webinar, a technical difficulty interrupted streaming, however, an edited version can be viewed on the AOC website. Please take a look.

<https://vimeo.com/519791636>



Presentation by Masuda-sensei of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College during the webinar inviting “Tomodachi 2021” applications

● **Developing further exchange between Japanese and Australian schools through “Tomodachi 2021”**

“Tomodachi 2021” is a great opportunity for Japanese students learning English and Australian students learning Japanese to communicate with people of their own age while using each other’s language and engaging in online exchange with little time difference.

At a time when COVID-19 prevents Japanese and Australian schools from visiting each other, it is wonderful to see this exchange take place – an exchange program that will connect a total of 400 Japanese and Australian schools – thanks to the initiative of the AOC and the broad support of both governments. I believe that not only schools with long years of exchange with existing sister schools, but also many new schools will become interested and involved in exchange for the first time as a result of “Tomodachi 2021”.

Furthermore, looking ahead to the resumption of school trips to Japan post-COVID, the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) is expanding its multilingual website which introduces know-how and many examples for those planning future school trips.

If we use the opportunity presented by “Tomodachi 2021” in order to develop exchange that continues beyond next year leading to actual mutual visits, it will significantly enhance exchange between Japanese and Australian schools, and the Tokyo Olympics will leave a wonderful legacy to the children of both countries. I would like to encourage everyone involved in sister cities and sister schools between Japan and Australia, Japanese teachers in Australia and English teachers in Japan, Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) on JET, as well as parents and students themselves, to get involved in “Tomodachi 2021”. Let us work together to take exchange between schools in Japan and Australia into a new era.

“Tomodachi 2021” website

<https://www.olympics.com.au/community-and-schools/australian-olympic-connect-2020/>

“Tomodachi 2021” registration website

<https://aoc.tfaforms.net/13/>

Webinar inviting applications for “Tomodachi 2021” (22 February 2021)

<https://vimeo.com/519791636>

Pilot program media release (29 October 2020)

<https://www.olympics.com.au/news/olympic-hopeful-sakakibara-to-ignite-olympic-excitement-with-australian-and-japanese-students/>

Japan Educational Travel guide (JNTO)

<https://education.jnto.go.jp/en/>

(End)