

Reform of Higher Education in Japan: An Experiment in Akita

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There are currently 780 universities in Japan: 86 national universities, 95 public universities, and 599 private universities. In *per capita* terms, this is approximately the same as in the US. Considering demographic shifts, Japan probably has too many universities. But more important than the issue of numbers is the issue of the real quality of Japanese universities. Approximately 10 years ago nearly all Japanese universities shifted away from a liberal arts education. Japanese undergraduates suffered as they were forced into small rooms for specialized education. Students came to view the purpose of university education as the acquisition of vocational skills and qualifications. In my view, universities that operate this way are not real institutions of higher education. Liberal arts education must be restored in Japan.

What Is “International Liberal Arts”?

Akita International University (AIU), established in 2004 as the first public university corporation in Japan with a new mission to teach “International Liberal Arts”, has many unique features. These include studying aboard for one year, living in a dorm with international students, having access to a superb library open around the clock, and following a semester system and the so-called GPA system, in addition to having the option of September matriculation as well as a gap year system. All of these are epoch-making features, and AIU has been leading efforts to be a global standard-bearing university in Akita, in the north-east region of Japan. Despite its location, AIU has now become one of the top ranking universities in Japan.

Based on the traditional liberal arts education, which has been nurtured throughout the history of Japanese higher education, our university offers opportunities for students to strengthen their abilities to communicate fluently in foreign languages, especially English. AIU fosters the ethical standards, academic knowledge and intellectual expression necessary to contribute to a knowledge-based global society in the 21st century.

Educational Goals at AIU

International liberal arts education at AIU is faithful to the traditional ideals and methods of inquiry of the liberal arts, but complements them with the elements necessary for educating students who are eager to become leaders in global society. Its principles are summarized in the diagram below which shows in the vertical direction the “Five Educational Goals” of the university, and horizontally the “Five Methods of Inquiry” to be developed by students. Each of the goals represents a detailed operational account of the skills and competencies expected

CHART 1

International liberal arts education at AIU

Educational Goals	Methods of Inquiry				
Proficiency in Foreign Language Communication	Humanistic Perspective	Social Science Perspective	Empirical Methods	Quantitative Reasoning	Critical Thinking
Integration of Knowledge from the Broad Foundation of Multiple Disciplines					
Intellectual Autonomy & Ability to Make Decisions					
Recognition of Own Cultural Identity & Understanding of Other Cultures					
Understanding Globalization					

Source: Akita International University

from graduating students. For instance, the development of intellectual autonomy and an integrative approach to knowledge belong to the core of the tradition of liberal arts. Students should develop foreign language skills and an understanding of globalization. The innovative style of AIU education is reflected not only in these new goals, but also in the way those traditional goals are understood. Specifically, [Chart 2](#) introduces the learning process with our curriculum at AIU.

English for Academic Purposes Program (EAP)

As all AIU-degree-related classes are taught in English, students focus on intensive study of the language in this phase of the curriculum. In order to learn “in English” instead of just learning English, as well as to achieve our mission of developing and producing individuals with excellent proficiency in English, all students have to take part in the EAP program as soon as they matriculate.

In this course, students are divided into different levels based on their English skills, according to the result of TOEFL which all freshmen take as a placement exam. EAP consists of three levels. EAP 1 is for students who score under 460; EAP 2 is for students scoring between 460 and 480; and students with scores of 480 or higher are in EAP 3. This program will bring the TOEFL scores of students up to a minimum of 500 before they can exit the program.

Class size is typically kept small with about 15-18 students in a class, and classes are offered approximately 18-21 hours a week. The study environment at AIU fosters students’ progress. The Language Development and Intercultural Studies Center (LDIC), staffed with designated office staff and faculty members, facilitates self-directed study. The English program is staffed with approximately 18 full-time faculty members, most of them from outside Japan, who teach students with enthusiasm.

Basic Education (BE)

In this program, students study complex phenomena of the changing modern world using various analytical methods. They also explore basic concepts in social sciences, humanities, mathematics and natural sciences, as well as Japan studies. By studying these subjects offered in BE, students develop strong foundations to move on to the Advanced Education program aimed at making them wise and responsible citizens of the world.

In BE, one of our unique features is offering a wide range of courses including Demography, Defense Security Studies, Art and Music in the “Suzuki Method” – courses that are rarely offered in universities in Japan.

Advanced Education

After completing the BE program, students move to the Advanced Education program with increased levels of specialization. This program enhances students’ expertise in a selected area of specialization, either Global Business or Global Studies.

The Global Business program puts a strong emphasis on the fundamental theories of economics. After studying market mechanisms, students analyze various problems concerning markets and governments, and the role of civic society. They also explore new lifestyles, business models, global environmental issues, and issues relating to economic development and trade, to gain the ability to come up with new solutions for international society. By studying the international economy, industrial organizations and business organizations, students can become creative members of the future workforce.

The Global Studies program aspires to equip students with the awareness, knowledge and skills vital for success in a “globalized” world. The emphasis is upon problem solving, not the acquisition of specialized knowledge. This means developing “creative thinking” aimed at recognizing problems, developing realistic solutions and effectively communicating with colleagues in a clear and sensitive manner aimed at fostering international collaboration. This program consists of three areas of study: East Asia, North America and Transnational studies.

Study Abroad

AIU students must study abroad at partner universities for one year and earn credits, 30 in principle, in order to acquire a global perspective through cross-cultural experiences. To study abroad, students must meet the following requirements:

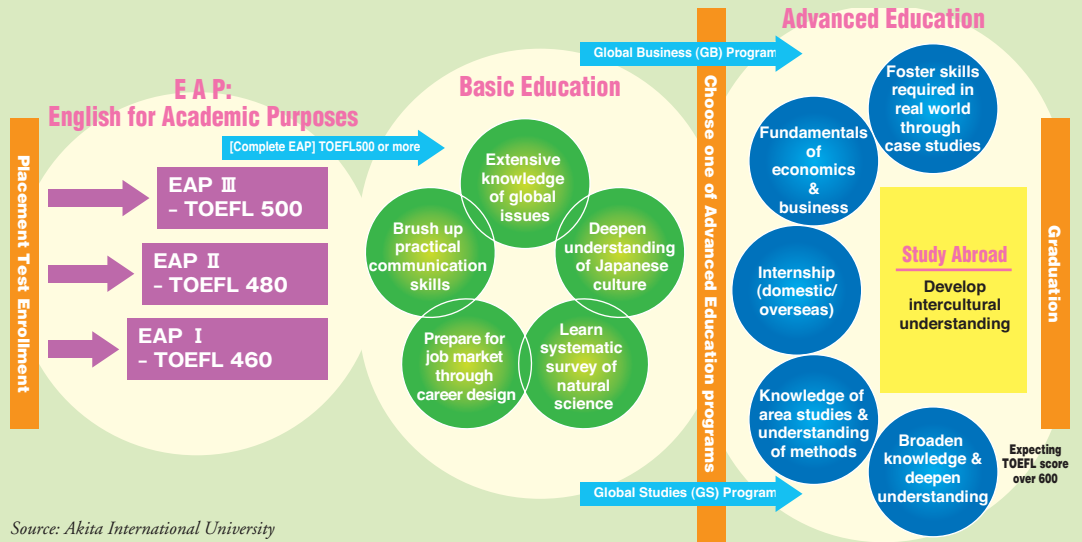
- 1) Complete EAP and earn 27 credits or more in addition to those earned in the EAP program by the end of one semester before the intended study abroad.
- 2) Have a cumulative GPA of 2.50 or higher at the time of application for study abroad
- 3) Have a TOEFL-ITP score of 550 or higher

The AIU curriculum is compatible with our partner institutions’ curriculum due to the use of course codes in accordance with international rules. Thus, AIU students are able to make their academic plans before they leave AIU and international students are able to make theirs before they come to AIU.

As to costs, students pay tuition at AIU but do not need to pay tuition to the partner universities during their study abroad, except for other expenses incurred such as the costs of textbooks, transportation, insurance and daily living. In this way, AIU students are able to take the opportunity to study abroad within the AIU tuition structure (680,000 yen).

CHART 2

Learning process with curriculum at AIU



Source: Akita International University

AIU has committed to its globalization and hosts international students from all over the world. Within eight years of its establishment in April 2004, AIU now has 131 international partner institutions in 38 different countries and regions (as of May 2012). The campus will surely become more diversified and multicultural in the years to come.

Promotion & Graduation

A student enrolled in a course is generally evaluated through a comprehensive review of scores in examinations, performance in class, attendance, and other factors.

The grade system at AIU is divided into 12 grades from A+ to D, and F. Grades from A+ to D are pass grades, while F is a fail grade. Students can earn the designated credits from courses they have passed. Other possible grades include W: Withdrawal, I: Incomplete, AP: Approved, and TR: To be Reported.

Grade points are allocated to the above grades as indicated below. A Grade Point Average (GPA) is calculated and used as a measure to evaluate students’ progress, understanding and achievements. Students must achieve a cumulative GPA of 2.00 or more after each semester. If students fail to achieve a cumulative GPA of 2.00, they will be placed under the Special Advising Care System.

As a result of these systems, about 100% of AIU graduates have been able to get jobs every year in the leading Japanese companies, such as Sony, Suntory, Mitsubishi Heavy Industry, the Bank of Japan, and ANA. Some graduates have gone on to top level graduate schools, for instance the London School of Economics, Australian National University and the University of Tokyo. “International Liberal Arts” is quite a new concept, and is not fully established as one of the main fields of academic study. But its goal is clear and important – to produce people who can be leaders in a global society. I believe that AIU will continue to devise the most useful and appropriate courses and systems to meet the challenges of these changing times. **JS**

Mineo Nakajima is president of Akita International University. He majored in International Relations at the University of Tokyo. A former president of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, he has been visiting professor at Australian National University, Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris, and the Graduate School of IR/PS, University of California, San Diego. He is also president of the Talent Education Research Institute, Japan.