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Reporter, Ms. Hayama Kozue

From Akita, a Global Standard

It's about a dozen kilometers from downtown Akita city. Near the airport, in an area with sparsely strewn houses, stands the prefecturally-supported Public University Corporation Akita International University. Its classes, uniquely, are taught entirely in English, and there is a year-long study abroad requirement. Here, the university president, Dr. Mineo Nakajima (who himself has the experience of teaching in the United States at the Graduate School of International Relations/Pacific Studies, University of California, San Diego,) is as he puts it, "nurturing people to succeed in the international society."

Required Study Abroad – Advantageous for the Job Hunt

Why did you become president of a university in Akita?

I wondered whether Japanese universities were alright as they currently are. I voiced my concern to the Central Council for Education that there was a danger that making more of the same kind of university was not really educational. If a new university was to be built, I wanted it to be unlike any currently in Japan – a university up to international standards. As I continued to assert this, I accepted a request from Governor Sukeshiro Terata to create an international university in Akita Prefecture.

Instead of having just a few elites studying intensely, the university would look after students. The faculty was mostly recruited from overseas. At first, 400 people responded to fill 20 job openings. Of the applicants, 60 went through interviews, and put on excellent demonstration lessons. Looking just at resumes, there were applicants who got their Ph.D.s at Cambridge and Oxford, but research and education are quite different. We tried to look at whether the applicants would be good at educating young adults in the liberal arts.

You require all students to study abroad for a year, right?

These days, it is necessary to have the ability to communicate in a foreign language. Because of that, we changed the structure of English education from the ground up. One change was the teaching of all classes in English. Another was the requirement of a year of study abroad, and the acceptance of credits earned at foreign universities. To that end, we require students to clear a TOEFL score of 550 before they study abroad.

There are certainly hardships associated with studying abroad, but through learning that can only take place in that environment, students come back significantly grown up. Some students return to Japan after the usual hiring period is over, but companies look at students' real-life experiences and abilities and hire them anyways, so I think that the study abroad experience is very useful.

Aren't there students who can't follow the lectures?

From the moment they matriculate, students are enrolled in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) intensive program. We have strict requirements for graduation and among our first class of students, we have 3 who were unable to clear the 550-point TOEFL score wall and study abroad, and thus were unable to graduate. They were called to the president's office one by one and given advice, including about the possibility of transferring to another university.

The revised Government Guidelines for Teaching of high school say that English classes should be taught in English.

It was, perhaps, too late to change, but it has certainly increased expectations for our graduate school to produce high-level English educators.

I understand that there are more than 100 exchange students from foreign schools, as well.

There are many Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese foreign exchange students at Japanese universities. At our school, they come from all over Europe and North America as well. It is easy for them to come because our classes are taught in English, and we use the same semester system that is common practice in Europe and North America. We currently have partner school relationships with 83 top-class universities around the world and offer a reciprocal tuition waiver with those institutions for students' convenience.

“Provisional Matriculation” – an Emphasis on Individuality

There are a variety of admissions processes, aren't there?

There are 6 types of admissions, including “AO,” “High School Study Abroad,” “Recommendation,” “A-B-C Schedule,” and “September Intake.” We have excellent applicants from all over the country. A major preparatory school has ranked the difficulty of entering our school as higher than the level of the former Imperial Universities. Admission can turn on a single point. Students who are below the pass line, for example students who have exceptional English ability, or those who excel in humanities, but not in math, can study at the school for a year as “non-degree-seeking students” rather than full students. This is called “provisional matriculation.”

If these students' grades are above average, they can become a full student from their second year. We have yet to have any such students drop out.

Even if you wanted to institute such a policy at another Japanese university, it might be impossible. Here, under the leadership of the president, it was implemented immediately. In American-style AO admission, universities go to schools and seek out excellent students. From this year, we will be using this method somewhat in Akita. We will receive recommendations about the top class students at each high school, have those students come to our campus from time to time over the course of a year, and choose to admit some of them.

Faculty and Staff Debate on Equal Footing

It seems to be an environment where it's easy to have a unique approach.

The decision-making system is different. The faculty and staff make up two pillars on the same level. Most universities are organized with a "two-tiered structure", the faculty on the top and the staff below them. Here, the level of the staff is higher, and the executive officer and other staff are involved in the decision-making process. When I was president of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, faculty meetings were long, and no decisions were made. Under the president's leadership the school management became more efficient. Debate happens at the Academic Affairs Executive Committee, and faculty meetings are only an hour long at the beginning and end of each semester.

Faculty and staff contracts are on a three-year basis. Is there any complaining that people can't settle into their jobs?

There is always an air of tension, but I mean that in a good way. Some of those who worked here for the first three years couldn't continue working here, but there are clearly a number of excellent people who came in the next hiring. Everything is going well now. Contracts can be renewed three times, up to nine years, but some people may be worried about what will happen after that. We are thinking of instituting a tenure system like that in the United States, whereby high-performing professors are hired on permanently.

What do you mean by "making a university up to international standards in Akita?"

Of course, originally we should see such schools in Tokyo. But there is a lot of value in doing something like this in rural Akita. International communication can take place over the Internet. If it is necessary to travel, there are flights from Akita to Seoul, and for traveling to places from San Francisco to Ulaanbaatar, transferring in Seoul is more convenient. In America, you fly for an hour out of a big city to get to a university town. That describes this area well. The biggest worry we had was about job hunting, but after seeing the results of last year's and this year's job searches, we didn't worry about that anymore. There simply is no downside.

Note from the Reporter

Most of the students live in on-campus dormitories or apartments. Though the university is a bit far from downtown Akita, many academic facilities, like the 24-hour library are put in place. The president's desire to create a university unlike those existent in Japan is palpable. The students here are different than those at big city universities at first glance, and under closer inspection as well.

Recent Events:

April, 2004	AIU opened as a public university corporation outside of Akita City. Class capacity: 100.
April, 2006	Class capacity increased to 130.
March, 2008	First class of 64 students graduates. Of the graduates, 83% enter the workforce and 17% continue to graduate schools.
April, 2008	Class capacity increased to 150.
September, 2008	The Graduate School of Global Communication and Language, a Professional Graduate School in Communication started (September Matriculation).

Akita International University's President, Dr. Mineo Nakajima

Dr. Nakajima was born in Nagano Prefecture. He graduated from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Department of China Studies. He researched at University of Tokyo, Graduate School of Sociology, specializing in International sociology. He became the president of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and later the president of Akita International University at its foundation. He served as a member of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Central Council for Education and the Cabinet Education Rebuilding Council. He is now 72 years old.

(Picture Caption) Dr. Mineo Nakajima, President of Akita International University, standing in the library, made from Akita Cedar and completed in April last year.