

Featured Interview

Universities in the Global Age Need to Offer a Liberal Arts Education and an English Curriculum Focused on Communicative Ability

Mineo Nakajima

President of Akita International University

Mineo Nakajima, Ph.D.

An international sociologist, Nakajima was born in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, in 1936. He earned a B.A. in Chinese studies from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Tokyo in international relations and sociology, respectively. He has served as president of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies; vice-president of the Japan Association of National Universities; inaugural secretary-general of the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP); committee member of the Central Education Council of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT); and a member of the cabinet Education Rebuilding Council. In addition, he has held posts as visiting professor at the Australian National University, the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, and the graduate school of International Relations and Pacific Studies at University of California, San Diego. Nakajima has served in his current post since 2004. His numerous published works include *Pekin Retsu Retsu* (Beijing in Flux), which received the Suntory Academic Prize. He was awarded the Seiron Taisho Award for Excellence in his China and Taiwan Studies in 2003.



All of Akita International University's lectures are conducted in English, which has won the institution high praise with regard to the effort to prepare students for an increasingly globalized world. We talked to Mineo Nakajima, who has presided over the university as chair of the board and president since its opening in 2004, to hear his views on the ideal role of universities and direction for education in this global age.

Japanese universities have swum against the tide of globalization, becoming isolated islands of knowledge

Universities, as knowledge-based communities, need to be open to the whole world, regardless of nationality or race. Unfortunately, though, Japanese universities are still almost entirely limited to lectures conducted in Japanese by Japanese teachers for Japanese students.

National university faculty and administrative staff had been classed as civil servants until those institutions became officially reclassified as corporations in April 2004. Foreign nationals had thus been unable to serve as presidents or deans of a national and public university because they were precluded from attaining civil servant status in Japan. The situation is akin to how Japan had isolated itself from the rest of the world in centuries past.

Japanese universities have swum against the tide of globalization. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the revolutionary advances in information technology set the wheels of globalization in motion. Meanwhile, in Japan, that same year saw the revision of the Standards for the

Establishment of Universities, which sought to deregulate academia and introduce greater flexibility in university curricula. As a result, many universities began to place less and less emphasis on language education. At around the same time, policies were introduced to place a greater priority on graduate schools, resulting in faculty moving from undergraduate to graduate departments, which hollowed out the content of undergraduate liberal arts education.

It is important at the undergraduate level to place a considerable emphasis on proper instruction in foreign languages and liberal arts subjects. Indeed, globalization is leading to the demand for a greater ability to communicate in English and for a liberal arts education to have more depth and breadth, which are precisely the areas that Japanese universities have been neglecting.

Even a minimal vocabulary facilitates English communication

When Japanese students take university entrance examinations, they are divided into two groups: those who will study humanities and those who will study sciences. At that stage, the students are pigeonholed into narrowly focused courses within their particular academic departments. This process of “compartmentalization,” as I refer to it, is another way in which Japanese universities are bucking the trend of globalization. It would be better for students to be able to decide on their future direction only after they have entered university and begun their studies. In this regard, there is a need at the undergraduate level to prioritize to a greater extent language instruction and a grounding in the liberal arts.

English education, in particular, should be focused on nurturing communicative skills. This style of education, however, is not common in Japan. As a result, our universities have produced an uninterrupted stream of young adults who have studied English for ten years, starting in junior high school, but are incapable of actually speaking the language. Amending this situation requires a fundamental revamping of English education.

At Akita International University (AIU), students go through the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program immediately after entering the university to fundamentally bolster their English abilities. This allows them to reach a stage, after just four months, where they are capable of discussing

global issues. Even with a minimal vocabulary, students are able to communicate in English to some degree. At AIU, we place a premium on vocabulary and aim to teach our students between 7,000 and 8,000 English words.

Knowledge and personality both needed for those on the global stage

AIU has been the focus of considerable attention because our graduates have enjoyed a 100-percent employment rate of our graduates. This outcome is a byproduct of the university’s educational approach, rather than being the principle objective. In fact, we are a rare institution in that students must meet demanding standards before being awarded credits or allowed to graduate, so only around half of our students graduate within the regular four years. In many cases, students who return from overseas study voice a desire to do extra work, which delays their graduation until the end of four-and-a-half or five years. This is a way in which AIU has established world-class standards. AIU graduates have been able to find employment despite the tough economy, I think, because companies are becoming more discerning and want to know more than simply which university a candidate graduated from. That is to say, they are eager to know what their job candidates actually learned at university. Companies rate our graduates highly from that perspective, which has meant that many of them choose to hold recruitment seminars on our campus. I believe it will be possible to fundamentally reform Japan’s outmoded recruitment practices for new graduates and the “job-hunting seasons,” if universities and companies are prepared to evolve in those sorts of ways.

Students should spend their whole four years at university studying, and only begin looking for a job once they’ve graduated. This would allow them to concentrate on gaining experience while they’re young and creative, because it’s not too late for them to decide on their lifework in their late twenties or early thirties.

In any case, it is important that students get a proper education in liberal arts, including languages, so as to develop into a well-rounded person. It is not just about acquiring knowledge, though; people need a fully developed personality. Indeed, it is the combination of knowledge and personality that makes a person truly capable of function on the global stage.

TOEIC® Newsletter

— Digest Version —

[Special Feature]

Workforce Development and Keeping Pace with Business Globalization

According to “Survey on English Use at Listed Companies, 2011” conducted by the Institute for International Business Communication in January 2011, 94.6 percent of the 278 companies surveyed consider it “important” or “somewhat important” to foster their employees into a globally-capable workforce. As tapping overseas markets becomes increasingly important to corporate development, what are companies doing to adapt to internal and external changes brought about by globalization?

In this issue, we look at three companies that are coming up with innovative ways to develop a globally-capable workforce and improve their employees’ ability to communicate in English.

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The TOEIC® Newsletter is published quarterly by the Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC) in Japanese. It features how the TOEIC program is used effectively within companies, universities and other institutions. We offer the latest case studies of TOEIC program usage to our clients, so they can take full advantage of the TOEIC program within their organization. In this journal, we also introduce a trend of global human resources development and the globalization movement in Japan.

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