

REPORT OF THE AKITA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY EXTERNAL EVALUATION COMMITTEE

Members of the Committee:

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The Akita International University (AIU) External Evaluation Committee met in person at AIU on January 27, 2017 from 9:00 to 18:00. Prior to that, the Japan-based Committee members held a Skype meeting with Professor Gold on September 14, 2016, during which AIU President Suzuki and Executive Officer Isogai explained the Top Global University Project that would form the basis of the evaluation.

Unlike previous external evaluations that interviewed among all constituencies of the university to present a macro picture, this exercise focused exclusively on the Top Global University Project (referred to in the report as SGU – Super Global University Project; the English name was changed). Prof Gold has participated in these evaluations since the first one, and Prof Yonezawa and Ms. Fujimori have also participated several times. This was the first time Dr. Fukahori joined the committee.

The Self-Evaluation Report followed the viewpoints the AIU submitted to JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) during its call for applications for the SGU project. They will be used for the subsequent evaluations as well.

The Committee met with 8 different groups representing the four projects.

- 1) 24 Hour Promotion of Liberal Arts Education
- 2) Reform of Japan's English Education
- 3) World-Class Curriculum
- 4) International Benchmarking
- 5) Students living in theme houses
- 6) Students who participated in English Village
- 7) International students and students who studied abroad and participated in Project-Based Learning (PBL)
- 8) SGU Headquarters

Our overall conclusion is very positive. We agreed unanimously that AIU's leadership has attempted to implement the pledges made to MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and has already made significant progress in this effort. In this report we will make comments on the four projects and make some suggestions.

24 Hour Promotion of Liberal Arts Education

One key pillar here is the theme houses whose goal is to develop synergy between living and learning and address the issue of educating the “whole person.” There was some concern among committee members that two of them had failed. As to why this happened, we were told that some budgeting limitations and the physical structure of the houses were two key reasons. We think this is part of a process and they should not be dismayed. The three students we met, admittedly self-selected, were very enthusiastic about their house experience. Staff and faculty should meet with students periodically to gauge interest in particular themes for houses, although this will naturally change over time. We hope that with newly designed apartments in the future there will be more opportunity for students to congregate in common lounges and break down the anonymity of living in unconnected apartments. Students felt empowered by the experience of learning to live with diverse groups and being able to plan activities, make a budget and work with faculty supervisors who were very supportive. Social media helps maintain communication among students even though they might not meet regularly face-to-face in the house given their busy schedules and other activities. Such houses are not to everyone’s taste. We think it is a good idea to continue to organize them and tinker with their operation. A lot of the responsibility should fall to students who better understand how to mobilize their fellows. The 3 students we met were all female and we wondered whether or not there is a gendered component to the houses. We suggest polling some of the male students about this issue and why they might not be interested in living in such houses. The houses also serve the latent function of providing psychological support for students who might feel lonely, isolated or crushed by pressure. They can be a safe space. They also can be on the forefront of organizing civic engagement activities with the Akita community, something that is a major part of AIU’s mission. The houses also serve as a critical arena for personal development, particularly in the area of civic engagement, i.e., individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. This includes active membership in a group or association (such as the AIU community and theme houses), negotiating and consensus building, democratic decision making, mutual respect and tolerance, etc.

Reform of Japan’s English Education

We thought that the English education program, mainly the English Village idea, was developing very rapidly and successfully and involved many members of the AIU community, including international students. They are pedagogically interesting, multifaceted, varied, and lively. One issue to consider is follow-up: how to ensure that the participants are able to maintain what they have learned, and reinforce it. The AIU students we met who participated in the Village were really excited and energized by the experience. Some of them plan to become English teachers and this reinforced their commitment to this career. One student said that it was her English Village experience as a high school teacher that motivated her to study at AIU to become an English teacher. This circulation could be effective to cultivate a new type of English teachers with

proficiency skills. In the space of only 3 days they and the kids seem to have had transformative experiences. The children developed confidence speaking in English and conversing with foreigners, even though many of them do not speak the “American English” that the children are more familiar with. It is hoped that this might inspire some local children to apply to AIU, something that fits well with the university’s commitment to the community.

World-Class Curriculum

This relates to the next topic of International Benchmarking, as AIU wants to ensure that its curriculum meets world standards (which is not easy to define or measure) and that its students perform well during their mandatory year abroad. Project Based Learning (PBL) and (Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are part of the project being used to link AIU with the global educational community, in person and virtually. AIU continues to monitor higher education around the world, much of it through the experience of its students. Maintaining and updating a data base is essential as are mutual visits by administrators and interaction at other events, such as NAFSA meetings. There are problems trying to align AIU’s curriculum with that of 183 partners, some of which requires rethinking the relation between Basic Education and advanced classes.

A key element of this project is the Japan Studies Program that has been enriched over the past three years. This serves the needs of international students who come here to immerse themselves deeply in Japanese society and culture, as well as Japanese students who will be able to describe and explain elements of their own country during their year abroad. Many of the international students come to Akita instead of Tokyo or other major cities expressly to have a deeper connection to the “real” Japan, so it is critical that the Japan Studies Program works closely with the local community to ensure that they have this experience to carry back with them as “ambassadors.”

We met two students who participated in the PBL in Malaysia. This program did not seem to be well-prepared. The Malaysian side was late in communicating the schedule and some students did not have appropriate clothing. The AIU students needed to fund their participation by themselves that was a hardship in some cases. The Malaysian students were graduate students at much more advanced level than the AIU students and there were also problems communicating in English. However, in the Report on the 2016 Summer Joint PBL Program, one of them commented that he could overcome some difficulties and developed his negotiation and coordination skills, though it was a tough process from theme-setting to the final presentation.

International Benchmarking

AIU has selected three American colleges for this aspect of the Project, Georgetown, Dickinson and William and Mary. They are three very different institutions. The main instrument AIU uses is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). As it turns out, none of the 3 benchmarkers use the CLA. It is an

impressive challenge that AIU became the first university that participated in CLA, and tries to compare the learning outcomes of its students with those of the U.S. universities. The Committee, however, also believes that a university like AIU should aim beyond the CLA as to the quality education provided by their benchmarked peers above.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

We think that AIU is very seriously committed to its mission of preparing globally competent students. We suggest that AIU define explicitly what is meant by “global human resources” (as defined in the diploma policy). Given the increasing tension in the world at this time, this is a noble mission. In previous evaluations we were asked whether or not administration, staff, faculty and students were aware of and considered AIU’s Mission Statement in their activities. This was not part of our charge this time, but we were provided with a revised Mission Statement upon request. We concluded that AIU indeed takes this seriously and that it pervades the SGU Project. The leadership and faculty remain committed to regular self-evaluation and improvement, using international experience (we find “standards” too vague) to inform and guide their policies.

Founding AIU President Mineo Nakajima was a “disruptor” and we think that AIU continues to challenge many aspects of Japanese higher education and, in its less than 15 years’ existence, is already having a notable effect, in particular in such areas as English proficiency, global interaction and civic engagement. It might reflect some of this to MEXT itself.

One area that requires development is in STEM areas, including Digital Studies, and a new major in this field is under development. Along with AIU’s commitment to educating the “whole person,” are efforts to fuse science and technology with the humanities and social sciences.

Because the self-evaluation report was more focused on a limited set of questions, it left out much of the context, in particular, issues concerning the use of CLA. This instrument leaves a lot to be desired, as there are many aspects of AIU that it does not measure and results might lead to misunderstanding about the school and what it provides and has achieved. The report might go into more detail as to which aspects of CLA relate to AIU and which do not. CLA is used mostly by approximately 700 large American public universities and international institutions that might be very different from AIU, to measure the first two years of general education.

In the interviews we heard the words “budget limitations” a couple of times. We did not discuss any financial matters, including how the SGU grant fits into the larger university budget or the overall financial health of the institution.

We observed a substantial development of the graduate education, especially in English teacher training. The international exchange students also

provide diversity in the student community. This may be a difficult challenge, but a serious examination of active recruitment of international students in the regular programs and also a wide variety of career paths after graduation could be considered.

We think that AIU's continuous moves in the areas of transparency and democratization should be promoted especially under the minus ceiling subsidy from the local government. The school's leadership must maintain regular contact with the local government officials. Although we did not get a chance to meet with a broad group of faculty, staff, or students (and in the past we have seen student surveys), we came away with the impression that the current leadership team seems to be open to considering suggestions from bottom to top with the goal of continuous improvement and stronger community building.