



AIEA PROVOST PERSPECTIVES

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Internationalizing Higher Education in Rural Japan

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Time served as Provost: Since September 2014

Located in Akita Japan, AIU is a small (850 full time students), English-medium, liberal arts institution with a mission to educate its students to be responsible global leaders.

With an undergraduate degree in East Asian Studies from Princeton University, and advanced degrees from Georgetown University in Linguistics, Peter taught and served in multiple administrative roles for 25 years at International Christian University in Tokyo, and then served as director of NYU's American Language Institute in New York for four years before taking on the vice president post at AIU.



Given all of the demands and constraints facing higher education today, why did your institution decide to internationalize?

AIU was established in 2004 as an experiment in international higher education in Japan and as a challenge to the status quo. The founding president, Mineo Nakajima, believed that Japan's growth and full participation in the global age were restricted by the failure of Japanese universities to adequately prepare graduates who could effectively engage with counterparts on the world stage.

His goal was to change the face of tertiary education in Japan, and to produce a new generation of Japanese who would be equipped with superior communication skills, a liberal outlook, and both the desire and the capacity to contribute to a harmonious global community. Internationalization, then, is in AIU's DNA. The first and only university in Japan with a curriculum delivered entirely in English, all of AIU's students are obliged to spend a full academic year studying at one of the university's 170 exchange partners. All first year students live in university residences, and all share time living with the school's international students, most of whom study at AIU for a full semester or academic year.

In addition to English, AIU students, most of whom are native Japanese speakers, are also expected to develop proficiency in a second foreign language. Approximately 60 percent of AIU faculty are international faculty, and nearly all AIU faculty hold advanced degrees from institutions outside of Japan. As a public university in rural Japan, part of the school's mission is to provide Akita prefecture with graduates who are able to bring global perspectives to local issues.

In the second decade of its existence, AIU aspires to become a world-class liberal arts college through curricular alignment and benchmarking activities conducted with its more prestigious overseas partner schools.

Has the role or importance of internationalization at your institution changed over the past five years? If so, how? How do you see it changing in the next five?

From its beginnings, AIU has aimed to create opportunities for its students to experience the world through engagement with an international student body and faculty, and the university's network of institutional relationships. The role of internationalization has not changed, but AIU has gradually added to its portfolio of partners and program models, as it strives to establish the capacity to send each of its students overseas individually, and to develop institutionally supported faculty-to-faculty relationships that will increase its capacity to infuse the curriculum with the highest levels of academic rigor and expertise.



AIU is looking to connect individual faculty with faculty at partner institutions for the purpose of linking their syllabuses and forming cross-institution student working groups. While still in the exploratory stage, we are encouraging faculty to develop fluency in the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) framework as championed by SUNY.

As the Japanese government now seeks to internationalize Japanese universities across the board through funding long term international programming initiatives such as the Global Human Resource Development project and the more recent “Super Global University” project, the central importance of international programs to AIU faculty and students will not diminish. However, competition for students who aim for a more globally-oriented education, as well as competition for faculty who can offer courses in English can be expected to increase as other Japanese universities expand study abroad options and make greater use of English as the medium for teaching. To remain at the fore of Japan’s internationalization efforts, AIU has steadily worked to improve the quality of the curriculum and the faculty’s ability to appeal equally to Japanese and international students.

What were some of the main challenges you and your institution faced in pursuing internationalization? What are some of assets you and your institution drew on for this work?

After having made a splashy start, the greatest challenges to delivering a world-class, English-language-based education in Japan are how to continue to attract and retain faculty capable of teaching in English at a high level, and how to continue to attract students equally capable of benefitting from an English-only curriculum, when English is not their native language. AIU also offers just two majors: Global Business and Global Studies, along with a Japanese studies program and a Japanese language program for in-coming exchange students and a variety of foreign language offerings primarily aimed at its Japanese students.

Fortunately, as a unique experiment in Japanese higher education, the idea of a globally focused university in rural Japan is unusual enough for the university to have garnered a great deal of favorable media attention. More importantly and partly as a result, perhaps, AIU, with its mission of developing future global leaders, has proven popular among adventuresome, linguistically talented, and outward-looking applicants. While other institutions of higher education in this country have made efforts to internationalize, none have had the advantage of starting from scratch with such a bold design. Still, competition within Japan is increasing, and further success will depend on the



university' ability to secure places for its graduates in attractive work situations and renowned graduate programs.

Toward this end, the university has always aimed to fully equip its students with the practical tools and skills needed to engage in meaningful work on the global stage. To help its graduates find employment or entrance to graduate school, AIU maintains a career services office and has recently implemented an academic career advising program that provides individualized counseling and care. The results have been rewarding. One hundred percent of AIU graduates have found employment or have been accepted into graduate school—a statistic that applies to all of its graduating classes to date. When this was first reported in the media, families across the country took note. The number and quality of applications increased dramatically, and the school rose in the national rankings, which are in large part based on the difficulty of gaining entrance.

The early success of the school has enabled it to earn a number of significant long-term government grants, which in turn have made it possible to support student mobility, invite visiting faculty from around the world to join the full-time faculty for periods lasting from one-week to a full semester, and facilitate the development of award-winning experiential study abroad programs. A specific example of one model is discussed below as an example of a successful initiative.

What is an example of an internationalization effort on your campus that was not completely successful? Why was that the case, and what did your institution learn from it?

While one of the goals of an AIU education is to create interpersonal relationships across cultures and national boundaries that will stay with students throughout their lives, one of our most significant internationalization shortfalls has been in the effort to integrate former short-term international students into our alumni network. Part of that is being a young university. We have focused on bringing students together on campus from our partner universities and ensuring that they have a positive, well-integrated community experience here, but we have largely left it to the students themselves to arrange their own networks without university oversight. The result is that we do not have a formal network for short-term international student alumni, which would be an invaluable resource for our students throughout their careers. The assumption that short-term international student alumni networks would develop along similar lines as such networks do in Japan has proven to be wrong. Japanese university alumni tend to have a strong school (in-group) identity, so even without much university intervention, they form and manage their own networks. As a result, university employees have little or no experience in



guiding the development of such a network. AIU is proud to say that we treat our Japanese students and international students as equal members of our community, but in this case, that stance led to our underestimating the importance of staff involvement in managing our international alumni network. We are now addressing this issue by investigating best practices in international alumni networking. More importantly, though, we can use this example as a wake-up call to consider the needs of all the members of our university community, not only according to their nationality and cultural customs, but in terms of how the duration of their stay impacts their relationship with AIU, as well.

Conversely, please discuss an example of an initiative that did work, and why.

As part of its push to provide students with significant overseas experiences that are directly relevant for their lives here in Japan, AIU has been developing and implementing short-term, experiential “project-based” learning (PBL) programs that pair small groups of AIU students with similarly sized groups of students at a number of our partner schools in the US. To date, we have run PBL courses with counterparts at UC Berkeley (International Migration, Transnational Family, and Community Building: Comparative Perspectives), Oregon State University (Developing Resilient Rural Communities in Japan and the United States), the University of Utah (Disaster and Crisis Management), San Francisco State University (Marketing and Branding in Tourism), and Dickinson College (Living Well in Later Life). The program with Dickinson was awarded the Forum on Education Abroad prize for “Excellence in Education Abroad Curriculum Design” in 2014. These for-credit courses involve pairing faculty at AIU with faculty at partner institutions who have similar academic interests, and facilitating their creation of four- to six-week programs that take place on or near both campuses. AIU students spend two to three weeks at the partner institution with the local students investigating real issues that are challenging the local population in both countries. The process is repeated back in Japan when the AIU students return with their partner institution peers to investigate the same phenomena here in rural Akita. These programs have been largely funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) through its “Reinventing Japan” project. AIU is now working with its partners to adjust the parameters of the program to fit the guidelines set out in MEXT’s “Super Global University” project. We are also looking into how the COIL framework may allow us to accomplish similar results at considerably less cost.



Who are the most important stakeholders you work with regarding internationalization at your institution?

As a public university, AIU needs to constantly work to make sure the local government and the citizens of Akita understand and appreciate the value of supporting an institution with such ambitious global aspirations. To accomplish that, faculty and administrators regularly engage with community organizations, bringing global expertise to bear on local issues, and creating opportunities for AIU students to have direct experience with the people of Akita. As an institution with many partners around the world, the university—particularly the staff in its International Center—has an obligation to maintain mutually meaningful relationships, and to ensure the welfare of all outgoing and incoming students. Anyone who has worked in this field knows that the caring and commitment required to do this well must come from the heart.

What are some of the key ways in which senior international officers can help individuals in your role advance internationalization at their institutions?

The senior international officer at AIU can help the university administration accomplish its educational mission most by successfully managing the delicate balance of incoming and outgoing students with the partner institutions in the university's exchange portfolio, and by keeping other administrators and faculty aware of the diverse academic and social needs of the university's international cohorts. Beyond this, as AIU anticipates developing thicker ties with faculty at its partner institutions to promote the creation of collaborative online, blended, and in-person international linkages, the SIO serves as the key liaison between AIU faculty and faculty at partner universities who wish to work through their international offices to coordinate syllabus content and scheduling that allows students at AIU to study together with students at the partner sites. The work of the SIO is facilitated by the university's governance structure that provides a place at the table at the president's senate, where all-important academic and student service matters are vetted.

Is there anything else you would like to share with senior international officers or fellow chief academic officers?

Student participation is not the issue at AIU. The quality of the educational experience at home, and curricular comparability with the institutions that AIU has partnered with are. Essentially all third year students leave the campus for study abroad (some students go sooner and some go later due to difficulty in reaching the requisite TOEFL scores and GPA requirements), and are replaced by incoming exchange students. This means the university is keenly aware when outgoing students experience difficulty due to higher academic



expectations at host institutions, and when incoming students express disappointment about the levels of academic rigor sometimes found at AIU. This is related to the need to adapt teaching to students who are still perfecting their English-language skills. Closing this gap is one of the key goals for AIU as it enters its second decade of existence. Through faculty exchange and other forms of faculty interaction, such as integrating coursework at AIU with courses offered at our partner institutions, we anticipate that faculty will become increasingly aware of how their syllabi can be developed to demand levels of work that match standards at top tier universities in the US and around the world. With internationalization of higher education now a clear priority in Japan—AIU is but one of 24 universities funded by the government’s ten-year “Top Global University” Project—the university is deeply committed to helping Japan’s students become more effective participants in this digitalized, globalized era. We are equally committed to providing direct and meaningful experiences with Japan for students from around the world. As a residential campus with English-language instruction and a commitment to engaging with the surrounding prefecture, AIU is uniquely positioned to foster contacts between its incoming exchange students and Japanese society. Thus, while incoming students are not required to arrive with prior knowledge of Japan, they nonetheless have abundant opportunities to learn about Japan through engagement with Japanese in and outside the classroom. We invite institutions that wish to work with us to contact us, so we can begin to collaborate in the pursuit of common international education goals.



The **Association of International Education Administrators** (AIEA), a membership organization formed in November 1982, is composed of institutional leaders engaged in advancing the international dimensions of higher education. The purposes of the Association are to:

- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

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