

International Christian University

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Creating a better future through liberal arts education

Established in 1953 in Mitaka, Tokyo, International Christian University (ICU) is one of the few universities in Japan to have a College of Liberal Arts, and it has focused on liberal arts education since its founding. Classroom buildings and facilities are located on a wooded campus of about 620,000 square meters. Despite its campus size, what makes ICU unique is its relatively small number of students — each year is comprised of just over 600 students — making it possible to have small group learning.

The Japan Times interviewed ICU President Shoichiro Iwakiri and Chair of the ICU Board of Trustees Hiroataka Takeuchi on Aug. 5 to discuss ICU's role in education in the time of globalization, along with other topics.

The following is an edited excerpt of the interview.

College of Liberal Arts

Question: Why does ICU have only a College of Liberal Arts in the first place?

Iwakiri: In the wake of the disastrous state caused by World War II, there was a need to create an educational system for the coming new era in Japan. Universities had dedicated too much to specialized fields, failing to view the big picture and lacking critical thinking or dialogues.

Reflecting on this situation, ICU was established in 1953 featuring liberal arts education from a broader perspective, in which students can learn professional areas as well.

In the years since, other universities have also created similar-minded departments, but how ICU differs from others is that we only have the College of Liberal Arts. Ours was modeled after American liberal arts colleges.

We have 31 majors in the Division of Arts and Sciences, and students advance their studies to their specialized field from their junior year. Unlike most universities, where students are committed to a major from their first year, our system enables students to choose their major later.

Takeuchi: A key phrase is "remorse over the past." In Japan, diverse opinions were totally removed heading to the war. When the Japan ICU Foundation (independent educational foundation) was launched in the U.S., the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still fresh memories for American Christians. So, ICU was established with a concept of being the "University of Tomorrow."

Additionally, liberal arts education creates an individual's foundation. In the U.S., there are many small liberal arts colleges and the reason students go to such schools is to acquire the foundation necessary for their lives. The same goes for students attending ICU.

Question: Another unique feature of this

university is small group education; what are some of the advantages of it?

Iwakiri: Dialogue and critical thinking are central to ICU's educational foundation. Large group education is not conducive to them.

Question: ICU is the only Japanese university that is a member of The Global Liberal Arts Alliance (GLAA), comprised of 30 colleges from 18 countries. Could you tell us about it?

Iwakiri: ICU joined GLAA in 2014. The alliance focuses on education itself, namely how to enhance education, through the sharing of educational systems and contents. An advantage of being a member is to complement connections with universities in Asia and Africa, where we are not that active compared to other regions.

What we are working on through this initiative is to create joint courses with universities abroad via online connections. Next year, a joint class is scheduled to start with a university in Pakistan.

Question: Globalization progresses in various aspects, which includes the globalization of issues. How can ICU's liberal arts education make a contribution in this age and the future, as well as in nurturing people?

Iwakiri: After the coronavirus pandemic, some people argue how society will change, but a much larger issue is to find out where the whole world and globe is heading and overcome crises globally.

Of course, our university needs to address the ongoing coronavirus situation. But at the same time, from a larger viewpoint, global-scale issues can be broken down as local issues at the level of the individual. We would like to nurture individuals who can think about those global and local issues simultaneously and correctly determine the direction the world should head in.

Question: Is liberal arts education essential to such a goal?

Iwakiri: Indeed, it is. For example, look at environmental issues. Knowledge of natural sciences is, of course, necessary, but that of law and social sciences is also required to solve it. At the same time, philosophical questions such as people's place in nature need to be considered, so various knowledge and experiences are essential. That's where thinking and actions based on the ideas out of liberal arts education come in.

Takeuchi: I think the presence of ICU in Japan matters very much. The country has adopted and developed the Shinto notion of living with nature, with an emphasis on "inclusivity." ICU, founded in Japan in the spirit of Christianity, has incorporated this idea and diversity has taken root over our nearly 70 years of history.

Classes under coronavirus

Question: Apparently ICU was



International Christian University (ICU) President Shoichiro Iwakiri (left) and Chair of the ICU Board of Trustees Hiroataka Takeuchi discuss liberal arts education and the role of ICU in nurturing human resources at the university in Mitaka, Tokyo, on Aug. 5. SHIMPEI SHIMADA

one of the first universities in Japan to decide in mid-March on transitioning online across the board for classes starting in April. Could you share the reason and some of the relevant measures?

Iwakiri: Initially we had a wide range of options, including delaying the start of the spring semester. But we thought preparing for the worst-case scenario would work best, so we decided to conduct all classes online without any delay in the university calendar.

After the semester, we found many positive aspects. For instance, there was a class on environmental studies and it dealt with an archaeological excavation site of the Jomon Period (10,000 to 200 B.C.) on the campus grounds. If it were a conventional class, it would have been difficult for all students to go and see the location at the same time, but this time students were able to see a live report by a professor from the site online. This would not have come up if we didn't have the coronavirus situation.

Additionally, we managed to have professionals and famous figures abroad conduct lectures online with relative ease. If we have a proper network, such lectures are feasible.

So, we have found greater possibilities from our trials.

Question: What are your ideas on combining both online and face-to-face instruction?

Iwakiri: Basically, we already decided to conduct classes with 60 or more students online. Small and mid-sized classes can be taught either online or face to face in a classroom. We call this mode of instruction hybrid.

Question: We are not sure yet how the situation will turn out in the future. Could you let us know some of the measures that ICU is planning, be it short, medium or longer term?

Iwakiri: This coronavirus pandemic has created a situation where there is less contact, but what lies in the essence of ICU's education is to have people-to-people contact. We also have the philosophy of coexisting with nature on our large wooded campus.

Experiencing life at this campus is extremely important in the four years of college. Students actually absorb many things through their senses as they study and learn on campus. We would like to continue nurturing this environment so that students can experience something in common.

Having said that, we also seek to incorporate technology for the betterment of our educational system, since we found new potential in responding to the pandemic. **Takeuchi:** People in the world have paid much attention to STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education. Some think liberal arts and STEM are totally different, and the typical Japanese way of thinking is to divide humanities and sciences. But these are misunderstandings and



I think STEM is definitely part of a liberal arts education.

At ICU, a new building dedicated to STEM education will be completed in 2022. This is something the university is undertaking in advance of the times. The facility will enable students to experience the latest technology and knowledge, where sciences and humanities meet each other. This kind of fusion would not be possible outside of a liberal arts college.

Iwakiri: It will be completed around August 2022. The plan is for the building to house laboratories of natural sciences and research offices of humanities and social sciences. There will be an exchange space on the first floor, and regular classes in a large classroom in this arts and sciences integrated facility.

We also plan to make laboratories relatively transparent by installing windows so that students from non-science areas of study can look at the experiments in person. We would like the whole space here to be somewhere students can feel close to science.

ICU's roles in the world

Question: We'd like to hear what kind of roles ICU can play in Japan and the world in the future. Could you share some of your ideas and hopes?

Iwakiri: The phrase "new normal" is often used when describing the post-pandemic world. Before the pandemic, however, the

world was still grappling with serious problems, including environmental pollution, intensifying global warming and climate change, and growing disparity. In a sense, the "old normal" was full of abnormalities, as Mr. Antonio Guterres, the secretary general of the United Nations pointed out. Old or new, what is normal should be redefined.

We want to educate people who can see the direction that we should move in and make contributions to overcoming crises, or be a place where this kind of thinking can occur. This is why liberal arts education is so important—to develop people's knowledge and critical thinking skills across a wide range of academic disciplines so that they can engage in problem-solving with a multifaceted understanding of the world.

Takeuchi: This will make it possible to deliver the innovative and creative solutions that will allow us to "build it back better," in the words of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

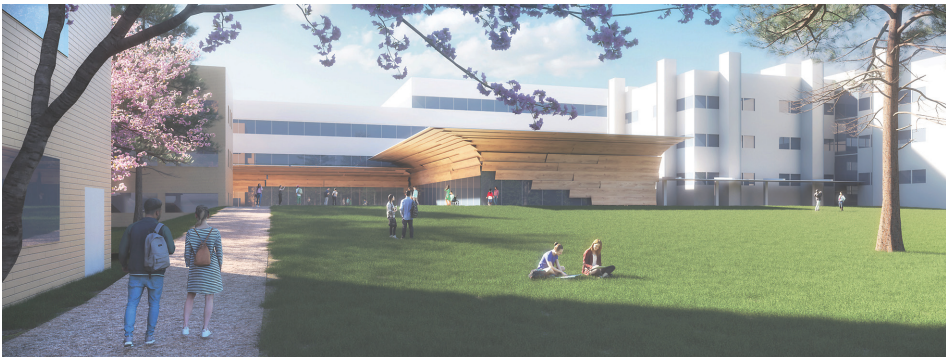
Iwakiri: What Takeuchi mentioned earlier, the "University of Tomorrow," precisely describes the state of ICU. I personally believe tomorrow's world will be better than that of today. Whatever happens in society, the university and academics will further advance to a higher stage. As long as the university functions, our mission is to understand human beings, society and nature deeper through education.

During their studies at ICU, I hope students take in the concept of diversity and become people who are open-minded to the world. **Takeuchi:** As my field of study is management practices, let me first paraphrase what Peter Drucker said 50 years ago, "You cannot predict the future, but you can make the future." As we now understand from the coronavirus pandemic, nobody is able to predict the future. But we can make it, and what kind of future are we going to create? It's indeed a better future, as Iwakiri said. I believe ICU can contribute to creating a better future.

For more information on the university, visit <https://www.icu.ac.jp/en/>.



Left: A class is conducted on the lawn in front of the University Hall. Right: Students participate in a class in the English for Liberal Arts Program.



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Liberal arts offers solid foundation for future study, career

After earning a master's degree in conference interpretation from a U.S. school, Yuta Okuyama was set to start his career as an in-house interpreter and translator at a Japanese company in Chicago from mid-August.

The alumnus of International Christian University (ICU) recalled the foundation that developed him into who he is today was all nurtured through his education and experience at the liberal arts college in Tokyo.

"The interpretation and translation that I'm engaged in requires a wide range of knowledge of various topics, so you need to look up things while being curious about this and that in your daily life," Okuyama told The Japan Times in an online interview on Aug. 11. "This is exactly what my liberal arts education at ICU taught me."

The students have the liberty to take classes from a variety of subjects when they are freshmen and sophomores to

seek and narrow down their interests, and then select their majors from 31 areas of specialization.

"There were subjects that turned out to be irrelevant to my major, but the knowledge I gained from those classes helped me later or I was able to find something new. I have had a similar story in studying and doing interpretation," Okuyama noted.

His encounter with ICU came when he was in a U.S. high school. His parents recommended him to attend a school in Japan so that he would have opportunities to learn Japanese culture, he said.

"I took part in an open campus event and I liked the campus and school spirit," Okuyama explained. "I was impressed with the school's mission to nurture internationally minded people and contribute to lasting peace."

In September 2014, he enrolled at ICU, where he decided to reside in a dormitory called Global House. The experience at this residence comprised of Japanese and international students fostered his interest in interpretation.

"I didn't have any interest in interpreta-

tion at first, but an experience of doing that to help exchange students at the dormitory brought me joy that I could be of assistance to somebody who doesn't understand the language. So, I started taking interpretation classes," Okuyama noted.

He added: "I increasingly aspired to be a freelance interpreter like my teacher. From then, I began vaguely to think of pursuing a career as an interpreter."

As a major, Okuyama chose music, because he found ICU's classes on music were not about playing and composition, but understanding music from cultural perspectives, which intrigued him. But at the same time, he selected interpretation as a minor, anticipating his future career.

To advance his study of interpretation, Okuyama applied for the university's Five-year Program. Launched in 2011, it allows aspiring students to obtain both a bachelor's and a master's degree in a specialized field in five years, instead of the usual six.

"I thought intensively studying interpretation at graduate school would take less time to be a professional interpreter than working days and attending a vocational

school at night," he said.

After receiving a bachelor's degree from ICU in June 2018, he spent about 18 months earning a master's degree in interpretation at Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MIIS) in California.

This was possible because ICU and Middlebury College (Vermont) have an agreement of cooperation, which includes the Accelerated Entry Program that enabled him to pursue graduate-level studies at MIIS in Interpreting and Translation, among other fields.

Recalling the days filled with study, Okuyama said one of the difficulties was that he had to deal with tests, besides regular classes, which were essential at MIIS to advance to the next grade and graduate.

"I was extremely busy with preparation, practice and amassing basic knowledge," he said.

Okuyama's laborious efforts paid off, and he completed the course with a master's degree in May.

He feels that an advantage of attending the program was that the number of choices in the interpretation business has



Yuta Okuyama interprets for a guest speaker at a school interpretation forum at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. CHIYO MORI

increased for him.

"The American market was added to my possible work field," he said. "I was able to know how the relevant market works and what kind of needs and job opportunities are out there."

At 25 years of age, Okuyama already has a firm plan.

"I'd like to brush up my translation skills and acquire basic business knowledge through in-house assignments. I'm hoping to

be able to go freelance in around three years if I can prepare myself enough," he noted.

Later in his life, he aims to pursue other work utilizing his experience in interpretation.

"I feel inclined to engage in work to share Japanese culture with the world," Okuyama said. "I'd also like to think about how cultures, whether Japanese or American, can further be blended to be willingly accepted by people."