



Diversity is the focus

Female researchers at Saga University

With few institutions being models for diversity in Japan, Saga University seeks to become a leader with its Office for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion.

The numbers are not flattering. While efforts have been made to improve the situation, as of 2018, Japan ranked at the bottom of 29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries for its percentage of female university faculty (1). The future does not look bright either, with the number of female students enrolling in the sciences ranking no better (2).

One reason, according to Saga University president Hiroaki Kodama, is the lack of role models. "Our gender ratios depend on the field. We have almost one-to-one representation in the Departments of Medicine and Agriculture, but our ratio is very skewed toward men in engineering," he says. Unfortunately, he adds, these numbers are not unique and reflect trends across the country.

Moreover, girls and boys perform equally well on science test scores through high school, which suggests that the problem begins at the university level (3).

Ironically, these conditions have also created an exceptional opportunity. While research funding in Japan is predominately given to select universities in the biggest cities, the national government has been more generous in distributing its money when it comes to solving the gender gap. One of these beneficiaries has been Saga University, located in Saga, Japan, and its Office for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (OEDI).

"We feel that a more diverse campus will attract more female and overseas students, which in turn will lead to more innovative research," explains Kodama. In reference to the long hours that Japanese employees are reputed to work, he adds, "a more diverse workforce will lead to a broader range of working styles, which will

create a better working environment." Saga University officially declared a new commitment to diversity in 2017 with the launch of OEDI, and the timing could hardly have been better. OEDI saw a major increase in its budget in 2019, when it was awarded new funding from the national government. Its staff more than doubled, and the team made plans to implement a number of new programs.

However, the funding came with clear rules, says Kodama. "The funding is in 3-year cycles. It is a short time to make an impact, but, even if the funding is not renewed, we can still build a framework for the university to promote diversity," he explains.

One of the original plans was to give female researchers more opportunity to travel overseas for research collaborations, with the intention of boosting their careers and enhancing the university's reputation by showcasing the talent and diversity of its faculty. "For many reasons, female faculty have fewer opportunities to build international networks, which gives them fewer opportunities to travel abroad. We want to help them build joint research projects," explains Kaoru Araki, deputy manager of OEDI.

Those plans were upended, however, when the unexpected happened: COVID-19. "The restricted travel really disrupted our plans to promote and advance the research done by our female faculty. We had to conceive new ways [to accomplish this]," she continues.

The pandemic as a positive

"Before the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for international collaborative research and study abroad may have been limited to universities in large cities with access to lots of information and male researchers with fewer roles in the home, but that perception has changed dramatically with the pandemic," says Araki. "People are now

getting information more through the internet and collaborating with overseas researchers." University faculty see this as a time of transition, she adds, and an opportunity to promote the activities and achievements of Saga's excellent cadre of female researchers, particularly via digital media channels.

One way this is being done is through the website *Musubime* ("connection" in Japanese), which features female faculty members at Saga University (4). The site highlights the broad range of representative research disciplines—from software engineering to water sustainability—with an emphasis on diversity and multinationalism.

Aya Shiraki, a professor in the Faculty of Medicine, sees the website as a clear positive. "I want to inspire the next generation of female students. *Musubime* has increased my visibility inside and outside the university," she says. Others, like Mie Ishii, an associate professor of the Faculty of Art and Regional Design, who researches the conservation of textiles, are already seeing a great benefit to joining the site. "It has increased my exposure and the number of international students expressing interest in my work," she says.

Musubime also focuses attention on the extraordinary research done at Saga University, which boasts of some of the country's best semiconductor and energy research institutes, including its Institute of Ocean Energy, a leader in developing new forms of power generation and extracting remote resources from the ocean. "By showing the diversity of our faculty and our research," says Kodama, "we want to appeal to researchers and students who will join us to solve some of society's greatest challenges."

Cultural challenges

Despite OEDI's best efforts, there remain persistent cultural factors that discourage women from entering underrepresented fields. In Japan, regardless of their careers, women do most of the housework. OEDI has therefore allocated funding for researchers—women and men—with young children or older parents who need special care to allow them to hire additional laboratory staff, providing more family time. In addition, funds are available for academic writing services with the aim of reducing the workload for those overwhelmed with personal responsibilities.

Furthermore, because diversity is not limited to just gender, OEDI is taking many steps to make the university friendly to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual,



Top left: President Hiroaki Kodama, Top right: Saga University campus, Bottom Right: Kaoru Araki, deputy manager of OEDI

and questioning (LGBTQ) community and to people with disabilities. "The gender gap is our biggest concern right now," says Araki. "But diversity includes many more groups, and it is our responsibility to create an environment that allows all of them to flourish." For example, staff are being trained about gender pronouns and the campus is being equipped with facilities that make it accessible to all.

Another initiative at OEDI is to educate staff and students about unconscious bias. To counteract possible misconceptions that the university's diversity initiative is some form of reverse discrimination, it is

important to acknowledge extraneous factors that are holding back talented female researchers. OEDI is therefore organizing workshops on this topic. "Unconscious gender bias is particularly prevalent in Japan. We believe this is a major factor in the underrepresentation of women at Japanese universities," says Araki.

For Kodama, enhancing diversity is a partial solution to another problem. Saga University sits in one of the least populated and most rural prefectures of Japan. With these programs, he hopes to reverse the brain drain happening in all rural areas in the country. "One of my biggest missions as university president is to show rural areas how they can effectively develop their human resources."

References

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