

University of Tokyo offers program fully in English

TOKYO

Initiative for small group aims to raise profile of institution across borders

BY MIKI TANIKAWA

As other Asian powers rise and Japan becomes less of a player on the world stage, the University of Tokyo is trying to strengthen its reputation as a globally relevant institute of higher learning.

Prospective students have long needed strong Japanese-language skills to do well at the university, which was founded 135 years ago, but that is beginning to change with the introduction of an undergraduate degree program taught in English.

The program, PEAK, for Programs in English at Komaba (Komaba being the name of the campus in Tokyo), is the university's first four-year undergraduate curriculum where all courses required for graduation can be taken in English.

"We wanted to remove the language barrier so we can tap the pool of top talent out there in the world," said Yujin Yaguchi, associate professor of American studies and the chairman of PEAK.

Driving such a move, which Mr. Yaguchi said was "unthinkable" 10 to 15 years ago, is the sense that Todai, as the university is commonly called in Japan, might be falling in international rankings, particularly behind top counterparts in Asia.

"There are problems with the way the ranking is done, but the university's leadership is not ignorant of the ranking, either," Dr. Yaguchi said.

The new degree program in English, Mr. Yaguchi said, raises Todai's visibility in the international education marketplace and plugs the university into the stream of top talent looking for opportunities worldwide.

"I visit university fairs around the world, and there are great talents emerging from high schools around the world," Mr. Yaguchi said.

Those students tend to be drawn to top colleges and universities, he said, adding, "We want them to include University of Tokyo as a possible choice."

Many high school graduates from South Korea and China, proficient in Japanese, are bound for Todai, but the talent pool is limited to a few Asian countries.

"We wanted to diversify our international student body" to include people from other regions, Mr. Yaguchi said.

The 27 incoming PEAK students, who finished their entrance ceremony on Oct. 1, arrived from 11 countries including Australia, Britain, Finland, Poland,

the United States and Vietnam.

Bryan Kuek, a Singaporean, said he never imagined that he would attend Todai because "I thought they teach only in Japanese." But he was browsing the Todai's Web site and noticed information that said the university was introducing a program entirely in English. "I got interested in the chance of becoming the pioneering batch," he said. "And this university is very prestigious, so that is a plus point."

The new group of international students adds less than 1 percent to the freshman class of 3,000. But expectations are high among top officials at the university.

Increasing the flow of international students and researchers and "enhancing diversity in our student body is

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high on the agenda for the university," said Masako Egawa, executive vice president for international affairs. PEAK will add to the dynamism of student flow, both in and out, she said.

Japanese students at the university also seem to be excited with the arrival of a new international group. At the suggestion of the international office, students formed PEAK Friends, an organization of volunteers who help the foreign students get acclimated to life at the university and Japan in general. Two hundred students have signed up for the program.

"I was surprised at the enthusiasm and the number of people interested in it, as they completely outnumbered the PEAK students," said Mr. Yaguchi, the program's chairman.

Despite the uncertainty of the new program, Seojin Lee, a South Korean, says she feels fortunate.

The university authorities are recruiting "30 students maximum, and they are putting so much resources on us, so we would all get a lot of attention, allowing us to do what we want to do and to be who we want to be — and that's what really drew me to this program," she said.

Students who speak English will be able to take an array of classes during their first two years, including physics, mathematics, philosophy, linguistics and economics. They will then proceed to a major in one of two fields during their third and fourth years: environmental science or East Asian studies, with a particular focus on Japan.

About three-quarters of the students are eligible for a full-tuition waiver and a monthly living allowance. Tuition is ¥535,800 annually, or about \$6,800, plus a one-time admission fee of ¥282,000.

