

Changing tourism strategy from a global perspective, students in the Shibusawa Scholar Program (SSP) propose sustainable development plans for Yonago City, Tottori Prefecture

What does it mean to be “global?” Being “global” is not just about communicating in English and being active overseas. To borrow the words of Professor Christina Ahmadjian, director of the Faculty of Commerce and Management’s SSP, the world has become more interdependent than ever before. Local phenomena can also awaken us to diverse ideas. The “Yonago Project,” the topic of this report, provided the perfect opportunity for SSP students to have first-hand experience of this process and develop the qualities required of a global leader.



Yonago City has abundant resources for tourism, including beautiful scenery and delicious seafood.

Learning about today’s world through experience from an “area within Japan”

The “Yonago Project” is a proposal-based project focusing on the theme of tourism strategy in Yonago City, Tottori Prefecture. It is a joint effort between people and organizations in Yonago City and seven second-year SSP students that aims at attracting tourists to the area.

Currently, SSP is a selective educational program in the Faculty of Commerce and Management that forms part of Hitotsubashi University’s “Global Leaders Program.” The key features of the program are that students take specialized courses in English and must complete a one-year period of study abroad. Understandably, then, you may be puzzled about why SSP students would spend time solving issues in an area within Japan. However, when we consider the skills that the program fosters, we can see that the aims of SSP are closely aligned with those of the “Yonago Project.” The educational concept behind SSP is “out of your comfort zone.”

In other words, we believe that “the ability to throw oneself into an unfamiliar environment” is essential for displaying leadership at the global stage.

This is even more the case for students who work hard in an urban environment that they are used to living in. The “Yonago Project” can also be regarded as a “domestic exchange” program, where students learn about today’s world through direct experience.

Yonago City and SSP United by a sudden “twist of fate”

One interesting thing about the “Yonago Project” is that it was not originally an SSP program but rather was created by chance. Its origin goes back to



With Masaharu Nagase (far right), Hitotsubashi University alumni and prominent figure in Yonago City. The collaboration was possible thanks to his generous cooperation.

a “request” made to the SSP program director, Professor Christina Ahmadjian.

The request was made by Hiroshi Fukino, a Hitotsubashi University graduate from Tottori Prefecture (Faculty of Economics, 1965). Mr. Fukino wanted Professor Christina Ahmadjian to visit his alma mater, Yonagohigashi High School, to introduce students to the appeal of Hitotsubashi University in a special lesson. Because Mr. Fukino was an old friend, Professor Christina Ahmadjian readily accepted the invitation and visited the school. Then, before returning to Tokyo, Professor Christina Ahmadjian suggested implementing a special SSP program in collaboration with Yonago City. The proposal stemmed from a desire to give SSP students the chance to encounter Japanese traditions and culture because the students were in the process of conducting research projects on tourism and would soon be studying abroad.

Upon hearing the proposal, Mr. Fukino consulted Masaharu Nagase, a local friend who had also graduated from Hitotsubashi University (Faculty of Commerce and Management, 1958). Mr. Nagase ran an oil company in Yonago City and was serving as the President of the Yonago Chamber of Commerce and Industry; therefore, the framework for accepting students was established instantly, with extensive support from the local business community. This episode is testament to the strength of Hitotsubashi University’s extensive alumni network, which reaches every corner of Japan. This is how the “Yonago Project” came about.

The local business community also had high hopes for SSP students’ solutions.

Faced with the task of proposing tourism strategies, the SSP students inspected the western area of Tottori Prefecture to understand its current state and the challenges it was facing (March 27–29, 2016). In Yonago City, the students received background information about the Tottori sand dunes and Mt. Daisen, two important natural resources in the prefecture; in Sakaiminato City, they worked on gathering various types of information from the Tourism Association, including details of a community development policy focused on the culture of *yokai* (folkloric spirits). Then, two months later, the students visited Yonago City again, this time with Professor Christina Ahmadjian. The students analyzed their findings before presenting the tourism strategies that they had developed at meeting at a hotel in the city (May 14–15, 2016). These presentations were

attended by 50 people, including key economic players from Yonago and Sakaiminato. It seemed that for the local area, the “Yonago Project” was not just about cooperating as part of a university-led educational program. The locals had also placed their earnest hopes in the proposals, which sought to regenerate the local area.

What kind of tourism strategies did the SSP students develop? They produced specific measures from two angles, namely attracting domestic tourists and generating inbound business by attracting foreign tourists. The proposals had two important characteristics, which only the global learning environment provided by SSP could provide. First, solutions were developed from a wide range of perspectives, and second, the proposals incorporated modern promotional techniques for showcasing the area efficiently and effectively, which did not rely on public relations (PR) methods used in the past, such as pamphlet distribution and PR activities. The key points of the presentations are introduced in more detail below.

In tourism strategy, “long-term attraction” and “target setting” are key.

The first point concerns how “tourism” is interpreted. Encouraging visitors to spend money in a



Fieldwork—at Yonago Castle ruins

local area will only serve to boost the number of tourists in the short term. Based on this approach, the SSP students focused on developing sustainable solutions for attracting tourists and identified the aim of their strategies as “creating Yonago fans.” Turning tourists into fans encour-



ages long stays and return visits and ultimately vitalizes the local area, as some visitors eventually move there to live.

The second point concerns what groups to “target.” To create fans, the SSP students divided the tourists they expected to attract into three groups: “Westerners,” “Chinese,” and “Japanese.” First, for “Westerners,” the students focused on the characteristics that these visitors prefer such as freedom when traveling rather than visit the usual tourist sights or participate in tours. To provide tourist services that meet these needs, the students renovated vacant houses in Yonago City and made a plan that incorporated rental using Airbnb (a web-based marketplace for renting accommoda-



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Students gathered information about community development activities focused on the culture of *yokai* (folkloric spirits).

Researching local tourism resources by sampling fresh oysters and Daisen Ham



tions). Next, for “Chinese” visitors, the students focused on the shift in interest from “shopping sprees” to “Japanese culture and nature.” They developed a “Bakutaiken Tour” (intensive experience tour), where visitors can fully enjoy the culture and nature of Yonago City, and proposed PR activities using Weibo (the largest social media platform in China) and WeChat (a free instant text and voice-messaging application provided by a large Chinese IT company).

Finally, for “Japanese” visitors, the students focused on the sleepier, unfrequented areas of the city. They presented a plan for providing free rental of vacant houses in the Kamogawa area, where visitors can enjoy nostalgic downtown scenery, and discussed the need for funding to open restaurants and cafés.

The goal was to win fans by creating a Parisian atmosphere in the area, where historical streets and natural features overlapped with the daily lives of the local residents. If this area could be developed into a haven of rest, then the local residents might also become fans of their own neighborhood.

The SSP students stressed this point, arguing that it would also be important in livening up the mood throughout the area as a whole and attracting more tourists.

“Local revitalization” is a good way to improve problem-solving skills.

At the presentation event, students also proposed techniques for promoting the whole of Yonago City. Drawing inspiration from the “Best Jobs in the World” campaign conducted by the Australian government agency Tourism Australia, the students also talked about attracting attention for the city both in Japan and all over the world by compiling close-up coverage of people in Yonago City engaged in the “best jobs in Japan.” Overall, the novel tourism strategy of including a global perspective demonstrated to the people in the audience that there were plenty of possibilities for the local area to develop. Meanwhile, for the SSP students, the experience of designing such approaches provided a valuable opportunity for them to step “out of their comfort zone.” There are differences between what looks attractive to locals and what looks attractive to visitors from abroad. There were communication gaps between the seniors involved in the project and the young SSP students. The students undoubtedly felt that their first-hand experience of these differences through the “Yonago Project” would help them in the



future when addressing global challenges.

Local regeneration is a major challenge not only in Yonago but also throughout Japan. However, for the leaders of the next generation, it is also a good way of enhancing their problem-solving skills in a practical way. We hope that undertakings such as the “Yonago

Project” will be developed at Hitotsubashi University for areas all over Japan as part of a global leader development program that helps create a bright future for the country.

Tourism strategies must help areas develop sustainably.

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Hiroshi Fukino



Let me go back to the time I asked if I could visit my former high school. It's very difficult to help high school students understand what it means to be global. So I made that request to Professor Christina Ahmadjian because I thought that hearing people whose very existence was "global" talk about their lives would inspire the students. We had the students recount their experiences, while using some English expressions, in front of the whole school in the gymnasium. The speeches must have had a powerful impact because after the event, some students even told their teachers that they too wanted to study abroad.

In the meantime, Professor Christina Ahmadjian experienced the appeal of Yonago City and was impressed with what she saw. After that, she suggested that a special project should be undertaken for SSP, and the person who came to mind for me was a senior of mine from Hitotsubashi University, Mr. Nagase, a man with a strong network in the local business community. He was the main player in terms of establishing the project, and I was just a mediator. When I explained the idea to him, he agreed to it, and everything went smoothly from that point. The local area paid for the SSP students' travel and accommodations, and we decided that if they were going to give presentations, it would make sense for them to present to members of the local business community. We were surprised when as many as 50 local VIPs came to watch, including the President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Chairman of the Local Association of Corporate Executives.

How could we revitalize the provincial city of Yonago? I wanted the SSP students to develop solutions from a global perspective. However, I also wanted them to consider Yonago City. I wanted them to think about whether it was really a good thing for so many people to visit the city. Even if tourists flocked there, if the neighborhoods became a mess, it would have negative effects for the local

residents, so it was important not to become preoccupied by short-term gains in an effort to stimulate the economy in the short term. The most important thing was to help the area develop sustainably, so in that sense too I hoped that the SSP students would come up with a plan that would raise important questions about the tourism strategies previously used in the area.

I had heard that most Japanese university students are concentrated in universities in the Kanto area and that the majority of these students were also born in Kanto. Many people are advocating the importance of being "global," but if these students and the adults around them only know about Tokyo, it can be difficult for them to accept diversity, and they would be unable to answer questions about Japan when they go out into the world. In this sense too, the "Yonago Project" must have provided a valuable opportunity for the students to learn about both the appeal and the challenges of a provincial city in Japan. Moreover, the students were able to see the network connecting Mr. Nagase, Professor Christina Ahmadjian, myself, and the local businesspeople, which gave them the opportunity to understand just how important human connections are and that they are built upon long-term trust relationships. I hope that the SSP students and other students from Hitotsubashi undertake more projects like this one and continue producing and conveying the results. To achieve this goal, I hope that the students make the most of Hitotsubashi University's excellent alumni network. (Interview)

Profile

Graduated from Hitotsubashi University's Faculty of Economics in 1965. Completed Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School in 1985. Has held top management posts at numerous global corporations, including Chairman and Representative Director at Dell Japan. During this time, he served as a part-time lecturer at Hitotsubashi University while holding other posts such as the Director of the Josuikai Alumni Association.