

# **From Inception to Impact: The Evolution of the Student Leadership Internship Program at Tokyo International University**

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## **Abstract**

The Student Leadership Internship (SLI) program at Tokyo International University (TIU) has evolved significantly since its inception. Initially conceived as a solution to support the growing demands of the Self-Access Learning Centers (SALCs) at the Kawagoe campus known as the English Plaza (EP), it began with a small group of unpaid student interns. Over the past eight years (2016–2024), this program has grown into a robust, paid internship that is critical to the university's academic support and international exchange infrastructure. This paper explores the development and impact of the SLI over the last eight years with qualitative testimonies, participation data, and specific examples of activities and collaborations. Insights from student engagement in the Learning Commons (LC) are also integrated, providing context for a broader audience and offering future enhancement recommendations.

*Keywords:* Self-Access Learning Centers, SLI, internship

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## **1. Introduction**

The SLI was first introduced to address the growing need for support in the English Plaza at the Kawagoe campus. SALCs and Language Learning Centers (LLCs) are critical for promoting autonomous learning, language acquisition, and intercultural competence (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Mynard, 2019). However, these centers are often underutilized, limiting their potential impact. The SLI was established to manage these challenges, using insights from both the Japanese and global

contexts to create a sustainable support system for SALC operations.

A SALC is designed to be a supportive environment that promotes learner autonomy and language use. These spaces should include services that allow learners to use language with a variety of materials and opportunities to use their target language (Mynard, 2022). Gardner and Miller (1999) provide a framework, offering practical guidance for designing and managing SALCs. These centers are not merely spaces for independent learning but are structured environments that actively encourage students to engage with resources and peers, fostering academic and personal growth.

In Japan, SALCs have gained significant traction, particularly in response to declining birth rates and the increasing need to attract international students (Mynard, 2019). Universities have adopted SALCs to create dynamic, multicultural learning environments that align with global educational standards. Research by Chen and Mynard (2018) highlights the role of physical layout, resource availability, and peer support in influencing students' perceptions of SALCs. These findings underscore the importance of creating spaces that are both accessible and engaging to a diverse student population.

## 2. Activities and Training Sessions

The SLI offers comprehensive training and activity management. Interns participate in weekly meetings focusing on peer English conversation practice (PEP), café service, and intercultural communication. Workshops at the start of each semester equip them with foundational skills to effectively facilitate activities.

Student engagement data from the LC at the Ikebukuro campus underscores the impact of these training programs. At present, 28 interns are working in the LC; their duties, as previously mentioned, revolve around shifts that start at 10:00 and end at 17:30, Monday through Friday. On average, close to 30 drinks are served in the LC café and nearly 20 reservations are made for PEP daily. The following chart shows the total number of drinks served in the LC café during the fall 2024 semester. These numbers are representative of current trends observed across several semesters. It is typical for the final month of the semester to see fewer drinks ordered due to the few open days and students' schedules.

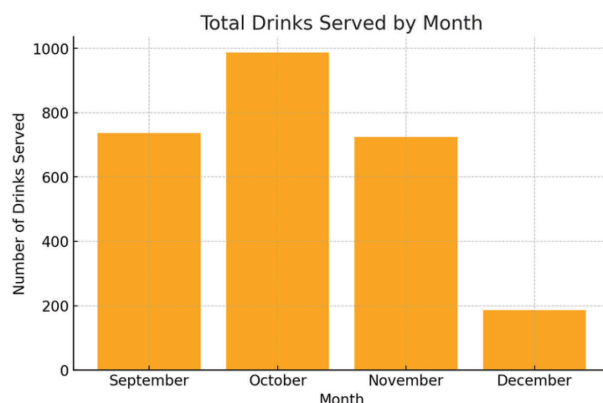


Figure 1 Number of drinks served in the LC café from September to December 2024

As Hays and Mueller (2024) note, activities like Peer English Practice (PEP) are highly attended, with many students exceeding the required participation for class credit. In the fall semester of 2024, the number of reservations made for PEP conversation sessions with interns peaked in October, while a decline was shown from November to December. Like the café drink orders, this is a common trend because December is much shorter, and students often prepare for final exams.

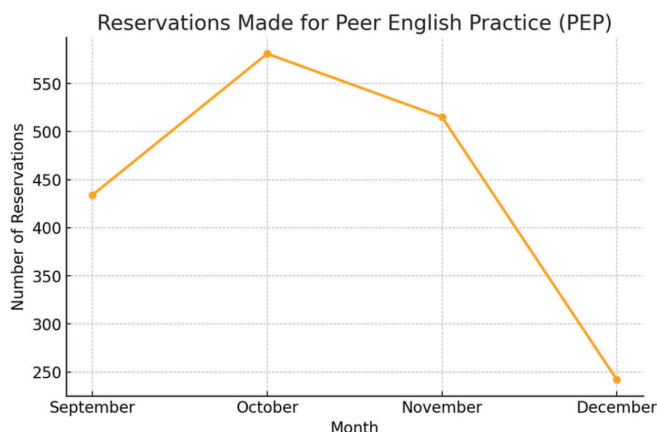


Figure 2 Reservations Made for Peer English Practice (PEP) from September to December 2024

The figures mentioned previously are not only used to calculate engagement of LC activities but also for training purposes. Intern training includes real-world scenarios, preparing them for professional challenges. For example, conversation topics in PEP and customer interactions in the café are used for role-play situations adapted for training sessions. The PEP sessions that were reported as especially challenging are considered. Similarly, exchanges with customers in the café where there was a reported problem with communication are also added to the training program to understand the difficulties experienced and to learn from them. One intern who participated in the training workshops has reflected on how organizing events—an initiative that supported over 100 students during a single semester—enhanced their event planning and coordination skills. Another intern, who facilitated weekly English conversation groups with consistent attendance of 8–10 students, noted that the experience improved their public speaking and group management abilities.

### 3. Impact on Students: Developing Leaders and Scholars

The SLI has significantly impacted both the interns and the students they support. Student users report improved academic performance and confidence in their abilities. In a 2024 survey of interns, 85% highlighted how PEP sessions and workshops enhanced their understanding of a variety of English spoken by the interns.

Hays and Mueller (2024) highlight that students visiting the LC for mandatory academic

advising often return voluntarily to participate in non-mandatory peer-led sessions, demonstrating increased autonomy and engagement. Japanese first-year students, who make up a significant portion of LC users, particularly value the space for its bilingual support, which fosters a comfortable environment for academic and social growth.

Expanding on these findings, one intern shared during a one-on-one meeting with a faculty supervisor in the spring of 2024 that their work facilitating structured events significantly improved their leadership skills and academic confidence (George Hays, personal communication, August 2024). These events included diverse activities such as “Open Mic Night,” which allowed over 80 students to participate in a cross-cultural activity. These activities’ success benefited users and provided interns with a sense of accomplishment and practical skill-building opportunities.

Interns gain essential leadership, communication, and organizational skills through peer tutoring and workshop facilitation. A business major reflected that managing group activities in the LC enhanced their teamwork skills, which later helped them secure employment with a multinational corporation. Another intern, A Digital Business and Innovation major credited their experience with improving their project coordination and time management abilities, leading to an internship at a Japanese tech firm.

#### **4. The Role of International Collaboration**

The collaboration with Willamette University was a pivotal turning point in the SLI’s evolution. Willamette’s established model of student-led academic support provided TIU with a blueprint for compensating and training interns effectively. For example, Willamette’s published programs emphasize structured peer tutoring and leadership training modules, which were instrumental in shaping TIU’s approach to formalizing intern roles (Willamette University, *n.d.*). Willamette’s influence also bolstered the case for paid internships at TIU, ensuring greater accessibility and inclusivity. By formalizing these positions, the SLI attracted a more diverse cohort of student leaders, enriching the learning experience for all involved.

Additionally, the partnership highlighted global best practices, such as offering leadership certification for interns who complete advanced training modules. The insights gained from this collaboration were invaluable in shaping the internship program at TIU. This model provided a concrete example of how student interns could be effectively integrated into the LC, taking on more significant responsibilities while receiving proper training and supervision. Moreover, the program’s success demonstrated the benefits of compensating student interns in attracting a more diverse group of participants and recognizing the valuable contributions these students made to the university community.

With Willamette University’s support, faculty administrators from the Global Teaching Institute at TIU presented a compelling case to the university leadership of TIU for the expansion and formalization of the Student Leadership Internship program. This support was crucial in getting the program off the ground and in aligning it with the global standard of having students work in campus jobs. This practice supports the students involved and enhances the overall educational environment. One of the most significant developments in the SLI was the transition from unpaid to

paid internships. This change marked a new era for the program, reflecting a growing recognition of student interns' value to the university. Several factors drove the decision to transition to paid internships. First, there was an increasing acknowledgment that the contributions of student interns were essential to the successful operation of the LC. These students provided critical support to their peers and helped sustain the quality and accessibility of the services offered in the LC. Paying the interns was a way to ensure that the program could continue attracting and retaining high-caliber students committed to their roles.

## **5. Strengthening the University Community**

The program's impact extends beyond individual participants to benefit the wider university community. Trained interns foster a welcoming environment in SALCs, where students from diverse backgrounds collaborate and support each other's academic goals. For instance, surveys conducted between 2020 and 2023 revealed that over 75% of EP and LC users felt the presence of peer tutors increased their confidence in seeking academic help (Hays & Mueller, 2024). Additionally, interns facilitated interdisciplinary study groups, bringing together students from business, economics, and international relations majors to solve academic challenges collaboratively.

Feedback from LC users further supports this. Hays and Mueller (2024) report that 68 first-year Japanese students cited the LC's bilingual environment as a significant draw, highlighting the value of inclusive language policies in fostering collaboration. Similarly, international students using the LC expressed appreciation for the opportunity to practice Japanese alongside their English studies, enhancing their intercultural competence.

The program's role in strengthening intercultural ties cannot be understated. For example, "Friday Events," hosted monthly at the LC, attracted over 150 participants in 2023. This number increased from the "Friday Events" held in the EP the previous spring. These events encouraged cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding, helping to build a sense of community within TIU's diverse student body.

Faculty also benefit from the program. By mentoring interns, they forge stronger relationships with students while alleviating administrative burdens. Interviews with faculty members revealed that mentoring interns improved communication and strengthened trust between students and staff. This dynamic created a more cohesive academic community, where both students and faculty contributed to a culture of collaboration and support.

## **6. Challenges and Lessons Learned**

While the SLI has achieved many successes over the past six years, it has also faced challenges. One of the main challenges has been managing the program's growth as it has expanded to accommodate more interns and offer more services to students. As the program has grown, ensuring that interns receive adequate training and support has become increasingly important. This has required ongoing investment in training programs and resources and careful planning and coordination between faculty advisors and university administrators. The program's success has

depended on the ability to balance the interns' needs with the demands of the LC and the broader university community.

Another challenge has been maintaining the quality and consistency of the internship experience as the program has expanded. With more interns and more services being offered, it has been essential to establish clear standards and expectations for all participants. This has required ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the program and a commitment to continuous improvement. The number of faculty advisors have increased. This expansion provides interns with more personalized support and opportunities to provide feedback, reflect on their experiences, and receive guidance from their advisors. Despite these challenges, the program has continued to thrive, thanks to the dedication of the interns, faculty advisors, and university administrators who have worked tirelessly to ensure its success. The experience of navigating these challenges has provided valuable lessons for the future, helping to ensure that the program remains sustainable and effective as it continues to grow and evolve.

## **7. Future Directions**

The SLI program has ample opportunities for further growth. Collecting longitudinal data on academic outcomes, such as GPA trends and graduation rates, will help demonstrate the program's long-term impact. Additionally, the program could expand content-based support for business, economics, and digital innovation students by training interns to assist with case studies, software tools, and complex academic concepts.

Strengthening collaborations with Willamette University and other institutions remains a priority. Joint virtual workshops expanded exchange opportunities, and shared training resources can enhance the program's global perspective. Finally, introducing ongoing professional development workshops with guest speakers from the industry will ensure that interns continue to develop leadership and career-ready skills.

There are many exciting opportunities for the continued development of the SLI. One of the key priorities for the future is to continue expanding the program to include more students and to offer more services to the university community. There is also potential to further integrate the program with other areas of the university, such as career services and academic advising, to provide a more holistic and comprehensive support system for students. Discussions are being held with faculty across different departments within the English-Track program to provide content-based academic support through peer tutoring. Since TIU's SALCs are spread across two campuses, now is the time to coordinate opportunities to offer language and educational support to the growing student body. By building stronger connections between the internship program and other support services, the university can enhance its learning opportunities and potential for students to grow.

Another promising avenue for the development of the SLI program is to enhance its collaborative ties with sister university, Willamette University, focusing on the exchange of ideas and practices around student-led academic support. This collaboration could take the form of joint virtual workshops, exchange programs for interns, and shared online resources that provide training materials and best practices. Such initiatives would allow both universities to benefit from

each other's experiences and innovations in student leadership and academic support. By fostering an international dialogue between interns and administrators from both institutions, the program can adopt a more global perspective on student services, which is especially beneficial in preparing students for the increasingly globalized business environment. This collaborative effort would strengthen the program's international relations and provide a richer, more diverse educational experience for the interns.

To further enhance the capabilities and growth of SLI interns, the program should consider developing and implementing ongoing workshops focused on leadership and professional development. These workshops would give interns the skills to excel in their current roles and future careers. Topics could include effective communication, conflict resolution, project management, and ethical leadership. Additionally, bringing in external speakers from various industries could provide interns insights into different leadership styles and success stories. Regularly scheduled sessions would ensure interns receive fresh and relevant inputs to help them grow as leaders. Such workshops would not only benefit the interns by providing valuable life skills but would also enhance the overall quality of the support they are able to offer to their peers, thereby strengthening the SLI and its impact on the university community.

## 8. Conclusions

The SLI program at TIU exemplifies the potential of well-structured student leadership initiatives. By continuing to evaluate qualitative testimonies, measurable academic improvements, and global collaborations, the program has become a model for academic support. Insights from Hays and Mueller (2024) on the Learning Commons reinforce the importance of inclusive, bilingual spaces in fostering engagement and autonomy. Future enhancements will focus on expanding its scope, strengthening international ties, and enriching interns' professional development, ensuring a lasting impact on both the university and its students.

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