

# **INTRODUCING ACTION LEARNING AT RIKKYO UNIVERSITY: SCALING FROM SCRATCH TO 90 CONCURRENT SESSIONS FOR 500 STUDENTS**

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I am very pleased to receive this award. In fact, I had the honor of receiving the Best Award in the academic sector on behalf of Rikkyo University in 2014, making this the second time I have received such recognition. In this paper, I would like to report on the introduction of action learning over the past 13 years at two universities, detailing the process, objectives, and outcomes.

## **Introducing Action Learning at Rikkyo University: Scaling from Scratch to 90 Concurrent Sessions for 500 Students**

I first encountered action learning in the fall of 2010. I had already initiated the Business Leadership Program (BLP), the first university regular curriculum leadership development program in Japan, on behalf of Rikkyo University's College of Business since April 2006. While the program had garnered enthusiastic support from students, challenges gradually became apparent. One of these challenges was the training of teaching assistants (TAs). Initially, friendly second-year students were selected as TAs for freshman classes. However, it became evident that some students were more interested in gaining attention in class or providing advice based solely on their experiences, rather than contributing meaningfully to the learning of their peers. To address this, I introduced action learning into the TA training, realizing that the phrases used by AL coaches were perfectly suited for TA interventions. Recognizing the suitability of action learning for leadership education, I expanded its implementation to students, leading to 120 second-year students, including TAs, joining 380 freshmen in 90 groups for simultaneous sessions in a large venue (Photo 1). Concurrently, the Global Leadership Program (GLP), offered university-wide, also featured action learning as an intermediate course in both Japanese and English, becoming one of the popular courses.



### **International recognition and the spread of leadership education**

In 2014, at the WIAL Annual Conference in Delhi, Rikkyo University received the annual excellence award in the academic sector, and I delivered the award commemorative lecture (Photo 2). In addition to Rikkyo University's initiatives, action learning became a core course in leadership programs at Kinjo Gakuin University and Kyoritsu Women's University. Around the same time, I presented the "Leadership Minimum Three Elements (goal-sharing, setting an example, and mutual support)" based on Kouzes & Posner's work in a format suitable for school settings in 2015. This became part of class activities to determine which roles—coach, problem presenter, or member—corresponded to each of the three minimum elements.

The expansion of action learning beyond Rikkyo University is closely tied to the boom in leadership education itself. While leadership education was initially exclusive to Rikkyo University for almost a decade, by 2023, it had expanded to over 30 universities. The rapid increase around 2016 seemed comparable to the explosive growth of leadership education in North American universities in the 1990s.



### **Successful implementation of action learning at Waseda University**

In 2016, after transferring to Waseda University, I started leadership education from scratch (again) and simultaneously provided advice for the launch of leadership education at other universities. At Waseda University, action learning was introduced as an intermediate course from the beginning. The course "Leadership Development of Others," which mainly focused on action learning, received the "Waseda University Teaching Award" in its inaugural year. The success of action learning at Waseda University differed slightly from Rikkyo University. Waseda University, known as a prestigious institution, traditionally held a reputation for students being "resilient in isolation and adversity." However, as a side effect of these traits, many students were uncomfortable seeking support, especially in the form of mutual assistance, which is a key aspect of the "mutual support" element in the leadership minimum three elements. This reluctance was rooted in the belief that requesting support meant admitting defeat. This phenomenon was evident in the rare occurrence of students seeking advice from TAs during classes. Through repeated action learning sessions, it became clear that seeking support and demonstrating leadership could coexist naturally. The reluctance to seek support diminished as it was understood that asking for help was not equivalent to acknowledging personal failure. In fact, the third element of the leadership

minimum three elements, initially named "colleague support" in 2015, was changed to "mutual support" to emphasize the bidirectional nature of support. Action learning is widely used at Waseda University, not only in staff training but also in the Waseda Leadership College, a leadership program for working professionals.

### **Waseda University as a hub for leadership education in Japan**

The growing popularity of leadership education in Japanese universities, with Waseda University at the forefront, attracted the attention of Cynthia Cherrey, Ph.D., the President & CEO of the International Leadership Association (ILA). In November 2023, Dr. Cherrey visited Waseda University, participated in a workshop conducted by me, and joined an action learning session in English with faculty, staff, and students. The events of that day were featured in ILA's official newsletter and social media platforms.

Newsletter: <https://ilaglobalnetwork.org/newsletter/ila-president-visits-members-in-japan/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7135717224123650048>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/InternationalLeadershipAssociation>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/COPiLTCvFFl/>

### **New Initiative: Alumni Networking and Action Learning**

A recent initiative involves organizing events combining action learning and meals to establish and maintain vertical connections among my students spanning over 40 years at the three universities. This event, conducted three times in six months, involves performing action learning with a group of 6-7 people, including those meeting for the first time. After the AL session, the group moves to a cooking studio to cook together, providing meals to everyone. The organizational development effects of action learning are evident, and the division of labor during cooking is smooth. This initiative is well-received, and it is expected to foster broader, informal connections beyond the university boundaries.

Moving forward, I aim to continue effectively utilizing action learning in leadership development for both college students and working professionals, supporting other universities in their endeavors.



