

Department of Human Rights: Aoyama Gakuin University

Faculty of Law, Aoyama Gakuin University

THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS in the Faculty of Law of Aoyama Gakuin University was launched in 2022. It started to offer the first human rights program in Japan at the university level.

Background

There are approximately one hundred faculties of law in universities (national, public and private universities combined) in Japan whose curriculums certainly cover human rights especially as part of a pillar of constitutional law. On the other hand, the teaching method employed by these faculties has largely focused on learning provisions of statutes and interpretation thereof, through required reading of legal texts, textbooks as well as cases in which those texts were interpreted and applied by courts. In the pre-World War II era when a handful of universities with law faculties used such teaching method with the aim of producing elite civil servants and lawyers, it might have been efficient.

However, since university education became highly popularized in recent decades, the limits of such teaching method have been apparent. Students barely 18 or 19 years of age who have little experience in life have to learn abstract theories of law, without actually understanding the relevance of such theories to real life, in a static manner. Even case law based on real incidents is distant to them: the cases are just “given” as something to be memorized as knowledge. Then, as many of them start working in private companies after graduation, the human rights theories learned tend to be estranged from their everyday life. But of course, knowledge and consciousness on human rights are essential to anyone, not only to protect oneself and others but also to build a society respectful of human dignity.

The need to learn human rights as a living and active tool was especially felt by law faculty members of Aoyama Gakuin University in the early 2000s, when graduate law schools were established nationwide including

in the University as a result of the reform of judicial system in Japan. Those who want to take the bar exam are, in principle, required to study in law schools.

While prospective legal professionals are supposed to enter law schools after undergraduate studies of law or other areas, faculty members (professors of constitutional law and international human rights law in particular) in charge of educating undergraduate students in the University shared a strong belief in the value of education at a law faculty designed for a wide range of students who would not necessarily become legal professionals, and proposed developing a human rights education program for this purpose. The program focused on “visualization” of realities such as poverty, discrimination and oppression at an early stage of undergraduate years, and on orientation of students to the study law with a sense of purpose, specifically to use law to address human rights issues in society.

On the initiative of those professors, a “Human Rights Course” was launched in 2013, as one of the four courses of the law faculty (the other three were public policy, business and legal profession) that students were required to choose from the second year in order to better organize their studies in accordance with their future career paths. “Human Rights in the Field,” an introductory “show-window” class designed to raise awareness on human rights issues through documentary films and talks of various guest speakers, was started at this time. This is currently a compulsory class for students of the Department of Human Rights.

The Human Rights Course constantly attracted significant number of students every year, and the law faculty decided to develop it into a full-fledged department that has distinct curriculum. After a few years of intense preparation involving a large number of faculty members, the curriculum obtained the approval of the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Department was launched in 2022. Thus, the faculty now has two departments, Law and Human Rights, with the capacity of three hundred eighty and one hundred twenty students for an academic year respectively. While many classes of the faculty are open to students of both departments, the curriculum of the Human Rights Department has certain uniqueness as described below.

The Concept

“Diversity.” Since people have different values and behaviors, recognizing these differences is important for us to live a fulfilling and secure life. However, to ensure diversity, there is something even more important: guaranteeing the “human rights” of each individual.

Human rights are universal rights that all people have, and are fundamental rights that are recognized on the basis that humans are dignified beings. They can be considered to be the same right or concept as what is called “fundamental human rights.” The protection of human rights is not only the principle and purpose on which the constitutions of constitutional democracies are based, but also a common value shared by the international community. The United Nations has set international cooperation for the respect of human rights as one of its objectives, and human rights are recognized as a fundamental value for all human activities, both domestically and internationally, as can be seen in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a human rights bill for the international community adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights adopted in 2011. The Department of Human Rights employs the term “human rights” as it is in its name, not the Japanese word “*jinken*” as a translation of “human rights,” to express the idea that the learning in the Department is geared toward universal human rights, not just the rights enumerated in the Japanese constitution.

Issues surrounding human rights in contemporary society are becoming more diverse and complex, and the significance of studying the “law” that is the basis for protecting human rights and analyzing and considering human rights issues from a legal perspective is increasing. Based on the concept of human rights and the fact that human rights are a common standard of value both in domestic legal order and in the international community, it is necessary to understand what legal systems exist and are functioning as means to eliminate and remedy human rights violations, and as means to better realize human rights, and to translate this into concrete action by nations, international organizations, and private companies both domestic and overseas.

In order to understand and solve various human rights issues occurring in society, such as discrimination, poverty and violence, it is important not

only to study law, but also to approach them from a broader perspective and in a multifaceted way.

Objective and Policies

The human rights program has the following educational and research objective:

We aim to develop talented individuals who can contribute to problem solving with accurate analytical skills, judgment, and expression, based on a deep understanding of the role that law can play in improving and resolving social issues, especially various human rights issues.

It is governed by several policies:

a. Diploma Policy (Policy for Graduation Certification and Degree Awarding)

■ Knowledge and Skills

Understand the concept of human rights and that human rights are a common standard of value in both domestic and international legal systems, and concretely understand what systems exist as means of eliminating and providing relief when faced with actual human rights violations, and be able to utilize that understanding in nations, international organizations, and private companies both domestic and overseas.

■ Ability to think, judge and correctly recognize that various issues arising in society are human rights issues, as well as the legal ability to think, judge and express views persuasively in order to solve them using the law.

■ Motivation, Interest, and Attitude

In daily life (for example, family life, professional life, etc.), be able to act with appropriate consideration from the perspective of respecting not only one's own but also the human rights of others. In addition, be able to maintain an interest in political and social issues broadly, and act as a citizen with a sense of justice as someone who has studied human rights law and a Christian spirit of charity.

b. Curriculum Policy (Policy for creating and implementing educational courses)

■ Knowledge and Skills

In the first year, students are offered courses that provide basic knowledge for thinking actively about human rights issues. Specifically, these courses include courses that provide opportunities to learn about and think about human rights issues through documentary films and talks by the people involved, courses that teach the basics of law in general, courses that help students understand the significance of the law, courses that teach how to investigate the field, and courses that teach the basics of political science and economics. From the second year, students are offered a variety of courses that provide knowledge and ways of thinking to contribute to solving human rights issues. For example, courses that deal with specific themes such as war, conflict, and poverty, specialized courses taught in English with an awareness of global society, and specialized courses in political science, economics, and public policy that take into account the importance of diverse approaches in considering human rights issues. In the third and fourth years, students participate in seminars to gain practical knowledge about solving human rights issues, such as evaluating and designing solutions.

■ Ability to think, judge and express

Students learn not only the “interpretational aspect” of existing laws, but also the “legislative aspect” through political process leading up to the enactment or amendment of laws and what the law should be, policy theory on the design of legal systems, policy evaluation theory, fiscal theory on national finances, economic policy, etc. Students will acquire practical and sound ability to think and judge about legal methods for solving social problems, including human rights issues. In addition, students will develop the ability to express their thoughts in writing and orally in practical and seminar courses.

■ Motivation, interest and attitude

They will pay attention to the various human rights issues that arise in society and have an attitude of seeking ways to solve them through the power of law and the politics that enacts the laws. They will have an attitude of seriously addressing human

rights issues without thinking of them as someone else's problem, based on the spirit of Christianity, which has had a major influence on the emergence of human rights ideas, that all people are created equal by the Creator.

Courses

The Department of Human Rights offers courses in relation to social science fields, such as political science, economics, sociology and public policy, and students acquire the ability to deal with social issues and systems related to human rights in an interdisciplinary manner.

Under this program, students acquire the ability to analyze real-world situations through classes such as “Human Rights in the Field,” a class that uses documentary films that visualize human rights issues; “Human Rights Fieldwork,” where students actually immerse themselves in human rights issues; “Public Policy Training,” where students participate in the field where government policies are formulated and implemented; and “Social Survey Theory,” where students learn data analysis methods to grasp the current state of human rights issues.

Some classes are held in English not only to learn about the culture and history of other countries and regions firsthand but also to learn how to express ideas and opinions about human rights issues and other social problems in a way that can reach to a wider audience. Overseas training to study at universities in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia during long vacations are also offered. Students will acquire the ability to act independently and proactively from a broader perspective, rather than focusing only on Japan.

Toward a Society Where People are Respected

The human rights program of the Department of Human Rights is the first academic program in Japan where students learn about human rights, essential for people to be able to live as human beings, from the perspective of legal studies and other academic fields. The human rights program covers human rights issues in society, and develops logical thinking skills and specialized knowledge to understand and solve these issues.

The program has three characteristics:

Point 1. Beyond the sphere of legal studies

In order to understand and resolve the various human rights issues in society, it is important to not only study law, but also to take a multifaceted approach from a broader perspective. The human rights program offers subjects in adjacent social science fields such as political science, economics, sociology and public policy, so that students acquire the ability to deal with human rights-related social issues and systems in an interdisciplinary manner.

Point 2. Beyond the sphere of the classroom

Classes use documentary videos to illustrate human rights issues. Students also learn to analyze real situations through actual fieldwork related to human rights issues, practical classes where they participate in the real planning and implementation of policies by government ministries and agencies, and classes on analyzing data in order to understand the current state of human rights issues.

Point 3. Beyond the sphere of Japan

The human rights program offers classes in English on challenges and initiatives in other countries and regions regarding the relationship between human rights issues and law, as well as classes on the culture and history of other countries and regions, and overseas study at universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere. Rather than confining their opinions to Japan, students take a broader perspective and develop the ability to act independently and proactively.

Curriculum

The Department of Human Rights helps students learn practical knowledge of law, politics and economics necessary for problem solving, based on the premise that “law exists to realize a society in which human rights are respected.”

In the first year, students are required to take “Introduction to Law,” “Introduction to Civil Law,” “Introduction to Criminal Law,” and “Legal Philosophy” to learn the basics of law. The department’s unique required course is “Human Rights in the Field A/B,” in which students watch docu-

mentaries related to human rights issues and listen to the voices of those who suffer from human rights violations, and then consider the role of law. In addition to legal knowledge, knowledge of adjacent social science fields such as economics, political science and sociology is also necessary to consider human rights issues, so in addition to “Social Research Theory,” which teaches data analysis methods to grasp the current state of human rights issues, “Introduction to Political Science,” “Introduction to Economic Analysis,” and “Introduction to Public Policy” are optional required courses.

In the second year, students are required to take a compulsory “Introduction to Human Rights Law,” which covers both national constitutions and international human rights law. Students can also take specific human rights-related thematic courses such as “War, Conflict and Human Rights,” “Poverty and Human Rights,” and “Gender and Human Rights.” In addition, in “Journalism Theory,” students can learn about the role of journalism in reporting on human rights issues, while courses that discuss human rights issues in English and courses using fieldwork are also offered.

In the third and fourth years, students will take more specialized courses and explore issues in seminars in line with their own interests. In addition, courses such as “Children and Human Rights,” “Business and Human Rights,” “Sexual Minorities and Human Rights,” and “Christianity and Human Rights” are offered, as well as the course “International Society and Humanitarian Aid,” which is offered in collaboration with the Japanese Red Cross Society, where students will have the opportunity to hear about the real experiences of people who are active in humanitarian aid globally.

See Annex A for the human rights course curriculum.

Experience So Far

Currently into the fourth year after its establishment, the Department of Human Rights has attracted a number of motivated students every year. Student responses to characteristic courses such as “Human Rights in the Field” have been largely positive, and some new courses such as “International Society and Humanitarian Aid” have become very popular, thanks to close cooperation with the partner organization, Japanese Red Cross Society. The Department will produce its first graduates in spring 2026, and it is hoped that students with solid knowledge and consciousness on human rights will make use of their ability in various fields in society such as journalism, pri-

vate companies, civil service, international organizations and non-governmental organizations.

On the other hand, challenges also exist. There are several entrance examinations and other admission mechanisms at the University, and at times, though this is not a phenomenon peculiar to the law faculty or Department of Human Rights, students join the Department without special interest and motivation to learn human rights, probably because they think that Aoyama Gakuin University is a good option in terms of its name, location in central Tokyo and positive image. As a result, a tendency of polarization of students is observed: while there are strongly motivated students who deliberately chose this Department and keep that motivation, there are those who lack such motivation and have difficulty in following the courses. Mismatches of students to the Department should be prevented as much as possible, in the process of admission mechanisms and also through dissemination of information about the Department to prospective students.

Another challenge is that, while courses such as “Human Rights in the Field” are generally well received, there are students who complain that the contents of films are too shocking or that they get depressive by watching the films. Concerning the former, while documentary films used in classes are carefully selected from already released pieces with high reputation, it is inevitable that some scenes are felt as upsetting to young students. But the point about getting depressed may be something that has to be taken seriously. It often happens that people feel depressed and powerless when they learn imposing realities, but it is not the intention of the Department to make students feel that way. Teaching staffs should be careful that students do not have a depressive idea such as “I/we cannot change anything anyway,” and should encourage them to learn and use law in order to improve the situation by citing positive, transformative examples and practices.

Conclusion

The Department of Human Rights started as an undergraduate program of Aoyama Gakuin University. In a number of countries, human rights courses exist at the graduate level. In the future, the creation of similar program in the graduate school of law at Aoyama Gakuin University or elsewhere should also be considered in Japan for those who wish to pursue advanced studies of human rights.

Annex A

Lists subjects that students of respective courses can take.

Required credits for graduation:132 credits.

Category	Subjects
Required Courses	<p>1st year Introduction to Law Introduction to Civil Law Introduction to Criminal Law Human Rights A Human Rights B Philosophy of Law A Philosophy of Law B</p> <p>2nd year Introduction to Human Rights Law</p>
Introductory Courses	<p>1st year Introduction to Political Science Introduction to Economic Analysis Introduction to Public Policy Methodology of Social Research A Methodology of Social Research B</p>
Core Courses	<p>1st year Constitutional Law A Constitutional Law B</p> <p>2nd year War, Conflict and Human Rights Poverty and Human Rights Gender and Human Rights Human Rights Fieldwork Human Rights Issues in the World Islamic World Studies International Human Rights Law Journalism Theory Journalism in Practice (Basic) Public Policy in Practice A</p> <p>3rd year Children and Human Rights Business and Human Rights Sexual Minorities and Human Rights Christianity and Human Rights Human Rights Law in the World Sociology of Human Rights Topics in Human Rights A Topics in Human Rights B International Community and Humanitarian Assistance International Criminal Law Comparative Constitutional Law (Protection of Human Rights) Topics in International Law A Topics in International Law B Journalism in Practice (Advanced) Public Policy in Practice B</p>

Basic and Applied Courses	<p>1st year Theories and Concepts of Political Science A Theories and Concepts of Political Science B Law and Economics</p> <p>2nd year History of Legal Thought A History of Legal Thought B European Legal History A European Legal History B Japanese Political History A Japanese Political History B History of Japanese Politics and Diplomacy Public Administration A Public Administration B History of Political Thought A History of Political Thought B Western Political History Comparative Politics International Relations Topics in Political Science A Topics in Regional Studies A Public Economics A Public Economics B Economic Policy A Economic Policy B Introduction to Public Finance Introduction to Labor Economics Introduction to Institutional Economics Topics in Economics A Welfare State Topics in Public Administration Policy A Policy Evaluation</p> <p>3rd year Sociology of Law A Sociology of Law B Topics in Foundation of Law A Topics in Foundation of Law B Theory of Political Process A Theory of Political Process B Local Government Regional Integration Theory International Security A International Security B Topics in Political Science B Topics in Regional Studies B Introduction to International Economics Topics in Economics B Topics in Public Administration Policy B Environmental Policy Criminology A Criminology B Theory of Non-Profit Organizations International Development</p>
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Advanced and Extension Courses	<p>1st year Overseas Training (Australia) Overseas Training (US) Overseas Training (UK)</p> <p>2nd year International Law A International Law B Introduction to Civil Proceedings</p> <p>3rd year Environmental Law A Environmental Law B Social Welfare Law A Social Welfare Law B Labor Law A Labor Law B Media Law A Media Law B Consumer Law Law of Education Juvenile Law Comparative Constitutional Law (System of Government) Criminal Law Procedure A Criminal Law Procedure B Administrative Law A Administrative Law B Topics in Administrative Law A Topics in Administrative Law B Language and Politics Issues in Contemporary American Society Introduction to Language Introduction to Sociolinguistics</p>
Seminar Courses	<p>1st year Introductory Seminar</p> <p>3rd year Seminar A Seminar B</p> <p>4th year Seminar C Seminar D (Graduation Thesis)</p>

Source: <https://www.aoyama.ac.jp/faculty/law/dh/curriculum.html?lang=th&wovm=en>