Research Administration in Japan

Lift Off! Beginning of the Japanese University Research Administrators' Network

The 1st Annual Conference of the Research Manager and Administrator Network Japan

By Tadashi Sugihara

Note: The opinions about RMAN-J in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of RMAN-J itself.

On September 1st and 2nd 2015, the 1st Annual Conference of Japanese University Research Administrators (URAs) was held in Nagano, Japan. More than 400 people attended, and there were 25 sessions, 21 oral presentations and 38 poster presentations. The Research Manager and Administrator Network Japan (RMAN-J) has started to unite Japanese URAs and reach out to the rest of the world.

The first annual conference of university research administrators, Japan

In a very hot and humid late summer, we celebrated the first annual conference of university research administrators, or URAs, in Japan, held at the Nagano Engineering Campus of Shinshu University, in Nagano Prefecture. This was the first official meeting organized by the Research Manager and Administrator Network Japan (RMAN-J). RMAN-J has more than 250 individual members, and 17 universities who are organizational members. The conference welcomed more than 400 people from over 100 organizations, including universities and research institutes. Eight companies joined the conference as sponsors. Though the size of the conference is much smaller than the Annual Meeting of the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA), this 2-day conference was a great success and it is fair to say that it was a historical milestone for Japanese URAs.

The road to the conference: Behind the scenes

It is only quite recently that any staff have been formally called URAs in Japan. The number of URAs in Japan has dramatically increased since 2011, when the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (or MEXT) initiated a program to develop and employ university research administrators. The program was designed because as researchers in Japanese universities obtained more funding for research, they found they had to spend more time on non-research issues. Universities were almost certainly aware of the issue, but nobody had yet come up with a really good comprehensive solution. The government initiative was therefore a "magic bullet", giving universities financial support to hire URAs to improve the environment for researchers. In the 2011 fiscal year, five universities hired URAs under this program. These universities made a big effort to establish a URA system and emphasize its importance to their researchers. As part of this, one of the five organized a URA symposium each year. Ten additional universities were supported by the program the next year.

Under the similar aim but by a different program, MEXT had supported universities to reshape the organizational structures. Kanazawa University, which was one of such universities, recognized the importance of the URA system and started organizing a meeting every year to facilitate mutual understanding among administrative staff in universities and research institutes. The first meeting was held on February 5th, 2010, and preceded the first URA symposium in 2011. This meant that there were two URA meetings each year.

It seemed obvious, however, to bring them together and form a network of URAs. The first joint meeting was held in 2013 at Kyoto University. The organizing committee held a session to explore possible directions as a network of URAs. They also asked attendees about the idea of establishing a Japanese URA network. These discussions eventually resulted in the establishment of the RMAN-J, and its first Annual Conference.

Selected topics discussed in conference

There was a wide range of subjects discussed during the conference, of which three seemed particularly notable.

University Ranking

On September 30th, 2015, the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2015–2016 were announced. Rankings provided by THE and others are of great concern to Japanese URAs, because the Japanese ministries and agencies such as MEXT specifically mention the rankings in their official documents. Several problems in the ranking system have been identified, including the smaller number of social science journals, reducing the number of possible publications and citations, and the exclusion of Japanese (and other non-English) journals from the citation databases used. Some presentations therefore discussed how the impact of research in humanities and social sciences could be appropriately measured.

Open Science

Recently, there are now expectations of clear, comprehensible explanations of research outcomes, especially for research that is publicly-funded. Scientists also have noticed the importance of disseminating research findings to the public. In Japan, the funding agencies clearly state the importance of explaining research outputs and outcomes to the public, setting this out in the application forms for certain research grants. The Cabinet Office of Japan also began to promote this trend. The concept of Open Science in the Japanese context includes not only Open Access to published research articles but also sharing of experimental data. Open Access is a key part of dissemination, and data sharing means that other researchers can also use the data, analyzing them from different viewpoints and potentially establishing new findings. An executive summary of the report for promoting Open Science published by the Cabinet Office of Japan can be found at www8.cao.go.jp/cstp/sonota/openscience/150330_openscience_summary_en.pdf

Global Network

The meaning of the term "global network" here is twofold, including both the network of Japanese URAs and the URAs in other countries. As well as its steering committee and the conference committee, RMAN-J has two task forces covering training programs and public relations. It is also planning to create a task force on international collaboration, to help Japanese URAs make contact with the wider URA community, and support collaboration between universities. RMAN-J therefore plans to establish a platform through which URAs in Japan and abroad can make contact and discuss, for example, joint applications for external research grants. There were sessions on the introduction of the task forces, as well as the importance of and methods for disseminating research results outside Japan.

Forward March!

I feel that I witnessed a great start for RMAN-J. But we cannot rest on our laurels. It is vital for RMAN-J to develop and grow, to be able to provide something new to future conference audiences, so that regular attendees do not lose interest.

The importance of RMAN-J still has to be recognized by those universities and research institutes that are not yet organizational members. The leadership of the steering committee is therefore critical. I suggest that small groups of members may want to start more casual regional meetings, to help to demonstrate the importance of the URA network to those who are not yet members.

I think we can say that Japanese people are not internationally renowned for their ability to organize and enjoy parties. Internationalization is a keyword in Japanese universities, however, so perhaps Japanese URAs should take it upon themselves to change this reputation and set others within the universities a good example. They could, for instance, organize party-like informal meetings locally (maybe over a glass of beer) and attend the annual meeting of NCURA to dance the night away with NCURA members from around the world! N

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