

Research Administration in Japan

By David H. Kornhauser



Cherry Blossoms on the Bench: Working with Japanese Research Universities

Japan has a great deal to offer to the international research community: first-rate science, superb facilities and know-how, and a public policy apparatus that puts a high priority on basic research in the determination of funding.

Consequently Japanese universities, especially the top schools which put special emphasis on scientific research, are often seen making contributions to a wide range of fields, and it is therefore not uncommon to see Japanese investigators joining international research teams.

But in cases where a West-based scientist joins a Japanese-funded team, what should a supporting administrator know about working with Japan? What are the relevant funding agencies and what sorts of spending rules do they have? Who can you turn to with questions?

A general overview of this topic was given at the recent 56th Annual Meeting in August 2014, introduced by David Richardson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and included presentations by Tadashi Sugihara, deputy director of Kyoto University's KURA, and myself.

The university and research funding ecosystem

As has been expertly described in previous NCURA magazine pieces by another Kyoto University colleague, Keiko Okano, the bulk of funding in Japan flows from the science and education ministry MEXT, through two agencies: the Japan Science and Technology Agency (JST) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS).

Of course other parts of the government — aside from MEXT — also provide research funding, such as the ministry of trade and economy METI, its energy-focused arm NEDO, and the health and welfare ministry MHLW. Some of the grants are of enormous size, targeting specific projects of particular importance to national science policy, a good example being MHLW's support for iPS cell research at Kyoto University, the home of recent Nobel laureate and stem cell pioneer Shinya Yamanaka.

But for individual researchers and research labs in Japan, and by extension most co-investigators outside the country, by far the largest source of funding comes in the form of so-called *Kakenhi* grants, issued by JSPS. These make up about 50% of all research funding in Japan, and unlike for e.g. NIH RO1 grants (to which they are often compared), recipients are from all research fields, from the hard sciences to the social sciences and humanities.

Hence although a great deal of important basic scientific research is supported through the other MEXT funding agency JST, and those grants certainly have significant prestige and importance attached to them, when it comes to the sheer breadth of research involved it is not unusual to consider *Kakenhi* to be synonymous with all of academic funding. This leads to a situation where the receipt of some form of *Kakenhi* (officially known as "Grants-in-aid for Scientific Research") money results in the recipient "becoming" part of the Japanese academic world: equivalent to earning a badge of honor.

Which brings us to the question of how best to support someone working as part of a Japan-based research team.



The author (left) presenting on Japanese universities at the 56th AM, together with David Richardson (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and Tadasbi Sugihara (Kyoto University)



Kyoto University's delegates to the 56th AM: Hiroshi Hasbizume (left front), Tadasbi Sugihara, and the author (standing)

Pitfalls and barriers for non-Japanese co-investigators

The key to success is effective communication. Since the funding environment and mechanisms are different, your best guide will often be a URA counterpart at the appropriate Japanese institution. This person should be able to guide you through the relevant rules and layers of the university administration and, if necessary, connect you to other related stakeholders.

Keep in mind also that Japanese URA job profiles may be somewhat broader than you are used to seeing elsewhere, including a significant degree of event preparation (such as conference planning), public outreach, and media relations. The delegation of responsibility for such functions comes about partly because of URAs' English language skills and experience working abroad, abilities not possessed by average university administrators.

More from a structural standpoint, important legal differences should also be kept in mind, such as related to export controls (where Japanese requirements may follow similar lines but differ in key areas), and the handling of genetic resources (problematic largely because the United States is not a party to the 2010 international Convention on Biological Diversity).

And it is worth noting that the fiscal (and academic) year in Japan almost always runs from April to the following March, meaning that purchases tied to a specific year must be received (physically delivered) by March 31. Simply ordered and paid for does not count!

Some common funding limitations in Japan include restrictions on:

- purchases unrelated to the actual research
- using money beyond the stated funding period (such as beyond the end of a particular fiscal year)
- mixing of funds from different sources (almost never allowed!)
- purchasing of alcohol, tobacco products, etc.

The last point may seem obvious, but it can become a thorny hurdle when dealing, for example, with the hosting of a conference reception at which beer and wine are to be served: the payment for these drinks must be handled from a separate source.

Kakenhi grants have additional restrictions, such as those related to:

- equipping of buildings and other facilities
- repairing of damage caused by accidents or natural disasters that occurred during the research period
- payment of wages or other rewards to principal investigators or co-investigators
- payment of expenses that should be covered by ancillary funding (for example utility costs generally provided by the host university)

Other rules and restrictions vary by funding agency and university, so it is key to carefully confirm purchases and timing with the relevant accounting office on the Japan side.

Getting even closer

Going beyond simply being part of a Japanese investigator team, an even higher level of involvement would be for a researcher to take up a visiting, part-time, or temporary position at a Japanese institution, which would open up the possibility of becoming a principal investigator for a Kakenhi or other grant. At this point, however, it would likely be best to leave the details to a Japanese counterpart familiar with the rules and regulations, even though at many major institutions comprehensive support for non-Japanese researchers remains elusive.

This feeling of a lack of full support extends to the ministry level where, for example, information on grants is often only available in Japanese, and the Kakenhi application process itself requires the applicant to navigate a non-English website.

Improvement in such areas is gradually coming. And in the meantime you can call upon a growing network of Japanese research administrators who are eager to assist Japan's research community with expanding its outlook and deepening ties with institutions abroad.

Japan is a treasure trove of knowledge, people, and funds. Getting beyond the barriers to reach the right person you need to get your job done may take some diligence, but in the end the reward will likely be even greater than the efforts expended. ■

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