Japanese grant system needs more resources

Sir — Shinji Yokoyama's letter reveals the perception of a researcher associated with the Japanese grant system (*Nature* 384, 402–403; 1996). But your readers should be told of recent reforms and the need for more resources. (I write as chairman of the committee on grants-in-aid for scientific research in the Science Council of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.)

Despite the recent rapid budgetary increase, there is still a gap between the needs of researchers and the available resources for grants, which for the fiscal year 1997 (which starts on 1 April) amount to roughly US\$1 billion. This may all be spent on direct research expenses other than salaries and overheads, but when divided among 35,000 annual awards it averages no more than US\$25,000, with an average support period of 1.5 years.

Starting from fiscal year 1997, however, the size and duration of support for small and medium-size grants will be enlarged in an attempt to provide a more stable research environment. To avoid too negative an effect on the success rate, a substantial budgetary increase is called for

in the next few years.

As for the proposal review, the 2,000 or so researchers involved are doing their best to provide fair and objective reviews. For the vast majority of small and medium-size grants, there is a two-round review system. For large-scale grants, outside referees are invited to comment, and applicants are interviewed. Although Yokoyama says that "many of the applications are outside the speciality of the reviewers", the reviewers are in fact chosen from a list of researchers recommended by academic associations in each research area. They are appointed for a single term of two years. After the term is over, the names of all reviewers are made public.

Since fiscal year 1996, a summary of comments from reviewers has been sent to failed applicants for large grants. From fiscal year 1998, the number of applications that first-round reviewers are asked to mark will be reduced. A renewal system of grants will be adopted soon, but cautiously, as this would also negatively affect the success rate of new proposals without a budgetary increase to finance it.

More reforms will follow because a major review exercise is in progress on the evaluation of the government's research-related activities.

A further increase of the grants would not result in a greater concentration of

resources in 'rich' universities. Although the 'priority research area' was criticized for such concentration, large numbers of researchers participate in one 'priority area'; naturally, a great majority of them come from other universities. The planned increase in the grants would fund the reforms and is expected to contribute to the creation of a more desirable research environment.

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Alphabets and citations

Sir — There is an alternative explanation for the variation in citation depending on an author's alphabet position that Tom Tregenza refers to (*Nature* 385, 480; 1997). Variation may not be related to position in reference lists but rather to a real variation in productivity or originality of publication.

In our field (sedimentology) it is noticeable that this effect is exaggerated by several unrelated Allens publishing prolifically, and one in particular, J.R.L.

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