

Japan



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Japan is changing. The cynic might say that this can't be so — that Japanese policy-makers always talk about change but that nothing ever happens. It is indeed true that new policies in Japan often end up having little ultimate effect, that new systems are trumped by conventional ways of doing things. The latest policy initiative — the reorganization of the universities into administratively independent organizations — might seem to be just another in a long line.

With the university reform, will the system become more fluid and adaptable? Will the university presidents become strong, independent leaders? Will young researchers be able to follow their creative scientific wits? Will changes to the funding system force these things to happen?

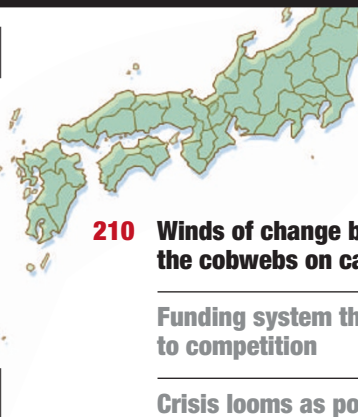
It is too early to judge the success of the many new policies described in the following pages. But several genuine indications of a changing Japan — both inside and outside the universities — are described here. University departments are launching term-based hiring and opening up positions for young researchers, university professors are testing the waters of industrial collaboration, and industrial researchers are taking their employers to court to gain recognition and recompense for their valuable research.

Such episodes illustrate a change in attitudes that will be given even greater momentum by the university reform. Until now, the pockets of change have been limited by a rather intractable framework — Japan's national university system. Now this framework itself is loosening. Whether or not the university reorganization actually achieves its goals, it is giving people room to think in new ways about how best to promote research. Researchers are asserting themselves more aggressively in university policy-making and in collaborations with industry. The expanding university engagement with industry could make a difference, especially for some of Japan's strongest suits, such as materials science and robot research, as well as biotechnology, in which Japan hopes to become internationally competitive.

And if, despite everything, the system still seems stultifying, Japanese researchers could leave it all behind and move to the island of Okinawa, where a new and innovative research institute is going up.

The coming year will tell us much about how these changes will play out, and whether they will eventually bear the desired fruit.

David Cyranoski



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