



Q&A
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BRANCHING OUT IN TOUGH TIMES

Since 2014 Juichi Yamagiwa has been the president of Kyoto University, Japan's number two university in the 2016 Nature Index. But, long before he learned to wrestle academic bureaucracy, Yamagiwa was being wrangled by great apes in Africa. He spoke to Tim Hornyak about the role universities should play in addressing society's big challenges, and the hurdles his own institution faces as government budgets for research become tighter.

Q: You started your fieldwork with gorillas in Africa in 1978. What is it like working with these remarkable creatures? How did fieldwork help prepare you for managing a university?

A: When working with gorillas you have to forget you're a human and act like a gorilla, otherwise they feel quite anxious. You have to copy their gait, eat the same kind of food and climb trees.

It takes quite a long time for gorillas to get used to you. I was beaten and bitten and had 17 stitches in my leg, as well as a big head laceration that required surgery. But, I love fieldwork because I prefer to have a unique experience that can generate questions to study, instead of just dreaming up the questions from scratch.

Being a university president is a bit like taming wild animals, of which there are many in a university. They each think they are the best in the world. The challenge for me is to skillfully maximize each person's outstanding abilities.

Q: Kyoto University researchers have worked with communities and local researchers in Africa and Asia. Why is it important for researching faculty and students to engage with local communities?

A: Kyoto University must be open to the world. I don't just want to increase the number of international students. We are not nurturing students who will work for the benefit of just one country, but students who contribute to the world.

Asia and Africa are two regions where Kyoto University has many bases for fieldwork projects in urban planning, sedimentation, flora and fauna research, public health and disaster-prevention. In our work there, researchers

follow the philosophy of "having partnership and respecting ownership".

Our goal is to conduct research with the perspective of local people in mind, and connect with local researchers.

Q: Government science funding in recent years has been flat in Japan. How has Kyoto University fared? Can the university produce high-quality research in this environment?

A: Many universities are facing diminishing funding. We are trying to overcome this with other sources of revenue, such as donations from corporations, despite an unfavourable tax regime in Japan for donations to universities.

The country's rigid system only allows tax deductions for costs related to tuition, but not for activities such as research. Universities suffer because individuals and corporations have limited incentive to make donations. Our annual budget is ¥160 billion (USD\$1.4 billion) but donations only account for a small fraction.

According to data submitted to the government by the Japan Association of National Universities, donations to national universities totalled ¥70.7 billion (USD\$ 626 million), which is more than 30 times smaller than the amount donated to America's state universities.

Meanwhile, our operating expense subsidies from the government have generally fallen every year. Universities have been told to be self-sustaining in terms of funding.

But, the most important thing for our university is to have the best students, from both Japan and overseas. They can be nurtured to become prestigious researchers and prize-winners. We need them to form connections with researchers from other countries and institutions. It's through these networks that they can generate research findings; funding alone won't create such networks.

Juichi Yamagiwa's field observations of apes contributed to understanding of how human families were established.

Q: Given these constraints, how can Kyoto University attract top researchers and teachers?

A: As a national university, Kyoto University's staff are considered associate public servants. Their salaries are based on the length of service and recommendations from the National Personnel Authority. But, public service pay hasn't grown recently because of the government's budget deficit.

On a limited scale we can decide salaries, without being influenced by the recommendations of the National Personnel Authority, in order to hire excellent researchers from Europe and the US, where salaries are five to six times higher than in Japan.

We're trying to resolve this disparity through other means, including encouraging cross appointments in which a professor can get a salary from Kyoto University and other universities. Companies can also pay part of a professor's salary through industry-university cooperation.

Kyoto University has a rule that states professors holding concurrent positions cannot be paid a salary from their other appointment that is higher than the remuneration we offer. We may need to relax that rule in future or Kyoto University and other universities in Japan will suffer from a brain drain. Already some people have left our university for institutions in Europe and the US. We must also remember that university research is different from working for corporations. We will continue providing faculty and students with the best environment for academic freedom and creative thinking. ■

