

Japan's academics fight erosion of tenure...

Tokyo. Proposals intended to introduce limited-term employment and the assessment of research performance for university faculty members in Japan are meeting strong resistance from universities. As a result, although the labour laws will probably be revised to implement the proposals, such contract employment is unlikely to be widely adopted in the near future.

Earlier this month, a subcommittee of the University Council, an advisory body to the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho), approved a draft plan calling for the reform of employment practices. The proposal, likely to be adopted by the council and the ministry next week, follows suggestions for reinvigorating the public-sector research system outlined in the five-year plan for science and technology

adopted this year by the Japanese cabinet.

The reforms are revolutionary for Japan, where all university faculty members — with the exception of non-Japanese (see below) — are government employees who enjoy guaranteed jobs for life, regardless of their academic performance.

But the proposals, which call for application of limited term employment at all faculty levels up to and including professors, have met strong resistance from professors within and outside the council. Akito Arima, president of the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research and chairman of the subcommittee that drafted the proposals, admits that concessions have had to be made as a consequence.

It is now being recommended that individual universities should decide whether to

adopt the new practices. There will be “no strong recommendation from the government”, says Arima. But he is pleased that, provided the plan is adopted next week, Monbusho will amend the laws for the employment of university faculty members to allow for contract employment, even if it takes “five to ten years, or even a hundred years” for significant change.

Arima hopes that contract employment will be used for young staff entering the system. Over recent years, the government has strengthened the graduate schools of many universities and, as a result, many research associates (*joshu*), have been promoted to associate professor or professor. But, because of a ceiling on the number of full-time government jobs, the *joshu* positions have been left unfilled. Arima's intention is that these positions should be filled with contract employees.

The subcommittee recommends that, at the end of the contract period, the employees should move to another university. They should be allowed to stay at the first institution for another term only in exceptional circumstances and after “very severe review” of their performance, says Arima. The subcommittee wants to encourage employees to move between Japan's universities, many of which suffer from ‘in-breeding’.

But again, it will be left to individual institutions to decide whether to adopt these recommendations. Many university faculty members are opposed to the assessment of the research performance of individuals. They claim that it is hard to establish fair criteria and that such assessment will encourage short-term research with quick results, undermining longer-term work.

Another criticism of the reforms is that they take no account of teaching performance. Faculty members who are good teachers but do little research will be penalized. But Arima argues that the reforms are aimed chiefly at young researchers who do little teaching. In any case, he says, universities could start to assess teaching performance if they wish.

David Swinbanks

... as foreign staff fear greater insecurity

Tokyo. Japanese faculty members in Japan's national universities enjoy tenure — and many are resisting the introduction of limited-term contracts — but most foreign academic staff are already on limited-term contracts.

The few hundred foreign academic staff in Japan are already feeling the pressure of government attempts to encourage universities to employ younger staff. They fear that adoption of the University Council's proposals for limited-term employment (see above) could make their situation worse, as the recommendations also apply to private universities, which have until now employed foreign faculty members on a long-term basis.

There are two systems for employment of foreign faculty members in Japan. Under the *kyoshi* system, which dates back to the Meiji era in the last century, foreign teachers are employed on one-year contracts with relatively high pay. It is senior people in this category who have recently been fired.

As an alternative, in 1982 the government introduced the *kyoin* system, under which foreigners are hired as regular department members on a longer-term basis, but on the same pay scale as Japanese colleagues. Even under this system, however, most foreigners are on limited-term contracts, averaging three years. Only a few — 66 out of 461 in July 1995 — have been given tenure.

The situation for foreigners who have worked in Japanese universities for many years recently became even more insecure. A 1992 directive from the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho) advised universities,

in the interests of the national economy, to employ young foreign faculty members whenever possible because of their lower salaries. This led to the dismissal of tens of senior foreign faculty members between 1993 and 1996. Many of them had been approaching eligibility for retirement pensions.

The plight of several senior foreign *kyoshi* who were dismissed following the directive was raised with Monbusho by Walter Mondale, the US Ambassador to Japan, earlier this year. The issue was later discussed in the Diet (Japanese parliament). But the ministry's response, in a directive to universities last June, was merely to repeat its advice that universities should, wherever possible, hire younger people.

The only concession made by the ministry is its suggestion that, in considering the renewal of contracts, age should not be the only criterion, and that it should be emphasized to new employees that they are only on one-year contracts, with no guarantee of long-term employment.

Ivan Hall, a Japan historian and one of those dismissed, describes the treatment of foreign faculty members as “academic apartheid”. He sees little hope of improvement, and says that the root of the problem lies with Japanese faculty members who are reluctant to employ foreigners on a long-term basis because of a deep-rooted fear that they will be disruptive to the existing system. This is despite repeated calls over the past decade by university and government officials for greater “internationalization” of Japan's universities and its public research system. **D. S.**

Dengue fever in Delhi

New Delhi. An epidemic of dengue haemorrhagic fever (DHF) sweeping New Delhi, the capital of India, has killed 200 people in six weeks and at least 4,000 are in hospital. With eight to ten deaths being reported daily, the epidemic has created panic among those in whom memories of 1994 plague (see *Nature* 372, 119; 1994) are still fresh.

“The problem is more serious than plague,” says N. P. Gupta, former director of the National Institute of Virology. “We had very good drugs for plague, but there is nothing specific against DHF.” □