

# Japan's universities resist 'agency' plan

[TOKYO] Japanese government proposals to transform the country's two leading universities — Tokyo University and Kyoto University — into independent 'agencies' have met strong resistance from both universities and from the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho).

A subcommittee of the Administrative Reform Council of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has proposed turning two national universities into independent administrative agencies (*dokuritsu gyousei hojin*). The proposal forms part of a drive for administrative reform launched last year by the prime minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto.

The universities at present come under the control of Monbusho. Under the plan, which was presented to a committee meeting last week, they would be given administrative independence, and a system would be developed for targeting funding at institutions and research groups with good track records. Initially it had been intended to focus on all 98 national universities, but this idea was discarded as impractical.

Monbusho's management of national universities has frequently come under fire for being inefficient and too rigid, and for dispersing funds to universities without adequate consideration of their performance. The government has also been criticized for a system under which research funds provided on an annual basis have to be used by the end of the fiscal year. As unspent funds cannot be carried over to the next fiscal year, many in universities feel that the system leads to taxpayers' money being wasted (see box).

Kiyoshi Mizuno, an LDP member and one of the key members of the Administrative Reform Council, argues that the changes would allow universities to be run more flexibly, because the number of civil servants who

oversee university administration offices would be reduced, and a wider range of funds would become available. Mizuno says that the plan will therefore help to raise universities' standards and make them "more competitive".

But Monbusho and the two universities claim that the proposal would jeopardize the quality of research and academic standards and lead to a significant increase in tuition fees. Hiroo Imura, president of Kyoto University, is worried that the agencies, which would be reviewed every three to five years, will "inevitably affect consistency in university education and research. This will lower our international competitiveness."

"Japanese universities are under great pressure to change, but we do not want the change to be imposed on us," Shigehiko Hasumi, president of Tokyo University, said at a press conference last week at which he expressed the university's opposition to the agency plan.

Hasumi says the plan should have been discussed at a national level, involving the universities and the general public, before being taken up in the political arena. "We are not entirely satisfied with how things are at present, but we would not make any reform unless we feel happy about it."

Akito Arima, president of the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (RIKEN), and former president of Tokyo University, points out that Japan spends only 0.9 per cent of gross domestic product on higher education, whereas the United States and some European countries spend twice that.

"Japanese universities should be funded by the government — or receive more support at the least," says Arima, a member of the reform council. Arima represents the scientific community in the panel and is reported to have protested strongly against

the plan. He claims that as administrative agencies involved in profit-making activities, the objectives of universities would be focused on financial matters.

"This is the last thing universities should be doing," he says. "Instead, there should be a reform on more basic issues such as endorsing a proper peer review system to improve the quality of each institution."

The main concern of the universities, however, appears to be a fear that the government will cut their funding if they become agencies, forcing them to rely more on raising funds from other sources. Monbusho says that this could well happen in Japan's difficult economic climate, and that the universities might be left without a secure source of funding.

Mizuno, who has been advocating the agency plan, feels that both universities will eventually accept the main thrust of the plan, providing the details are thrashed out more fully. But he accepts that convincing Monbusho will not be easy.

Asako Saegusa

## nature

is organizing a half-day conference on:

### UK university research: Dearing and after

Friday, 7 November 1997

2.00 p.m. – 6.45 p.m.

Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AG ENTRY FREE

The meeting will end with a panel discussion and be followed by a reception

Admission by ticket only, available from:

Mary Sheehan, 4 Crinan Street, London N1 9XW

or m.sheehan@nature.com

Fax: 0171 843 4595/6/7

### Speakers:

- **Sir Ron Oxburgh** (Rector of Imperial College, London, and a member of the Dearing Committee)
- **Mark Ferguson** (School of Biological Sciences, University of Manchester)
- **Jean-Patrick Connerade** (Department of Physics, Imperial College, London; member of the executive council, Save British Science)
- **Dame Bridget Ogilvie** (Director, The Wellcome Trust)
- **Brian Fender** (Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for England)
- **David Triesman** (General Secretary, Association of University Teachers)

## Inquiry investigates 'hiding' of unspent funds

[TOKYO] Five research-related faculties and four research institutes at Kyoto University are under investigation for allegedly 'hiding' unspent research funds. Such funds should have been returned to the government at the end of the fiscal year.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho) disburses funds to national universities in July. But money not spent by the beginning of the next fiscal year, on 1 April, must be returned by law.

Last week, university

administrators at Kyoto announced that tens of millions of yen have been hidden over a five-year period. Members of the departments under investigation — which include the faculties of pharmacology, engineering, science, and the institutes of chemistry and virology — are believed to have deposited unused money with several research equipment suppliers. These suppliers are alleged to have issued fake statements and kept the money until the next fiscal year.

Many researchers are unhappy about the inflexibility of the current arrangement, which means that departments often have either too little or too much money. "If we do not use up the allocated money, our budget might get cut," says a professor from one of the institutes under investigation.

Administrators say that the 'hidden' money, first discovered in April this year, "will be returned to the government, depending on the result of the investigation".

A. S.