

# nature cell biology

## Ten years of intercontinental research funding

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**T**his year, the Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP), which funds basic research in the areas of molecular and cell biology and brain research on an international level, celebrates its tenth anniversary. The HFSP was launched in 1989 following an initiative by the then prime minister of Japan, Yasuhiro Nakasone, who this summer was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the Louis Pasteur University in Strasbourg (where the HFSP office is located) for his contributions to the promotion of international research collaborations. The program was initiated at a time when Japan's economy was flourishing but its scientific research seemed isolated from Western countries. The primary aim of the program was, therefore, to promote basic biological research at an international level, and at the same time to provide an opportunity for Japanese researchers to collaborate more closely with scientists in other countries. From the start, the HFSP has awarded research grants to groups of several collaborating laboratories from different countries, and fellowships to individual postdoctoral fellows working abroad.

### Promoting international collaborations

Until 1992, almost all of the US\$30 billion annual budget was provided by the Japanese government. Although, in 1992, it was accepted that contributions to the program from the countries that benefit from it should be more equal, Japan still pays the lion's share (around 75% of the \$47 billion yearly budget). While it may seem hard to understand why a single country is funding the bulk of this program while receiving no bigger (and often smaller) a share than other countries, most Japanese researchers to whom we have spoken welcomed the program as "one of the best policies the Japanese government has ever invested into science". Most praise the contribution the program has made to promote Japanese science and its recognition in the international scientific community, as well as the personal contacts and collaborations it has allowed. Researchers in Western countries equally welcome the opportunity to obtain funding offered by the HFSP. "I think that this program is terrific, because it is in effect the only existing program which supports international collaborations with only very few strings attached to it," says Jean Gruenberg, a cell biologist in Geneva. Occasional scepticism in the beginning from Western countries viewing the program as merely a political move on the part of the Japanese government in an attempt to obtain privileged information seems to have been unwarranted, and the HFSP is widely seen as a program whose genuine aim is to benefit the scientific community. Importantly, Japan's partners have agreed to increase their shares gradually until the year 2002, allowing the total budget to grow to \$60 billion.

In contrast to many other grants, the HFSP awards are perceived as relatively unbureaucratic and the money can be used flexibly. The main criticism voiced is the low level of funding compared with the most important national grants in many countries. A sour point for many Japanese scientists is the reluctance of postdoctoral fellows to apply for an HFSP fellowship to work in Japan. This could be due to cultural and language barriers, but Iain Hagan of Manchester University, who went to Japan on an HFSP fellowship and will be awarded a prize as one of the best young investigators of the HFSP this month, wouldn't want to have missed the experience: "I went to the best laboratory in the field and worked in a very stimulating environment both scientifically and culturally". There is no doubt that, at a time when research funding is becoming increasingly competitive, the HFSP is playing an important part in funding research at an international level and promoting collaborations across geographical and cultural borders.