

Fostering Academic Diversity through Kakenhi

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In terms of research, the meaning and appeal of a comprehensive university lies in the diversity of its faculty members' academic pursuits. It is difficult for lay people, and sometimes even for experts, to comprehend the value of this diversity, but coming into direct contact with faculty members who have spent their life pursuing some interesting line of research can provide students with a real sense of the depth of scholarly inquiry, and also inspire fellow researchers in new directions. In the competitive environment of a university, personnel decisions often favor visible outcomes. The task of supporting the free ideas and conduct of faculty members with diverse value outlooks, and ultimately guaranteeing the diversity of academic endeavor as a whole, therefore falls to Kakenhi.

Recently there has been a rise in the prominence of large-scale project-based research grants, such as those offered by the Japan Agency for Medical Research and Development (AMED) in the field of medicine. The idea is to cultivate leadership in specific fields in line with national strategic objectives and with full accountability to wider society. This is a truly admirable endeavor that supports the wellbeing and advancement of society both today and into the future. For researchers, the grants are generous and attractive, and arouse their competitive instincts. Successful grant recipients walk the red carpet in their fields of research. Researchers are thus prompted to do whatever they can to secure grants if the theme overlaps at all with their own research field, even if it diverges to a certain degree from their own interests.

What is the essence of scholarly endeavor? What is the ultimate goal of science? I believe that both the essence and the goal lie in knowing “where humans came from, and where we are going.”

Can large-scale project-based research driven by the national government lead humankind toward this goal? I think not. The answers to the above questions I feel do

not lie in research that looks at most a decade or so into the future and demands visible outputs within a short space of time. Surely it is within the chaotic melting pot of scholarly activity that we will find pathways toward the ultimate goal of science.

One of the key roles of Kakenhi is to ensure that such chaos is not expunged from Japan's universities and research facilities. If you are able to obtain a Kakenhi grant, your status as an independent researcher is guaranteed no matter what kind of research you undertake. Kakenhi gives researchers confidence within their organizations to devote themselves entirely to the research they believe in.

Looking back, what role has Kakenhi played in my own research career? I spent my time as a graduate student pursuing research on functional brain imaging, an uncharted field in Japan at the time. It was a struggle that yielded virtually no success. Unable to find anybody within Japan I could consider a mentor, I was almost at my wits' end when I came across a research paper outlining some pioneering research done overseas. I decided to travel to Sweden to study and take my first step forward as a researcher. Despite returning to Japan with knowledge and skills enabling little more than simple imitation of my mentors' work, I received a warm welcome home in the form of a Kakenhi grant, and through that grant became connected to a community of researchers.

I was fortunate enough subsequently to be afforded a kind of citizenship of the community of researchers in functional brain imaging, and over time, thanks to large-scale projects and funding through industry-academic collaborations, I have been able to pursue my research activities as a team leader. This is all thanks to Kakenhi, which provided me in my fledgling years with status as an independent researcher. This is something for which I remain profoundly grateful to this day. If I had not secured a Kakenhi grant, my ideas would have been crushed under the organizational logic of a clinical medical research lab; I would have given up on pursuing my own research in a new field, and probably ended up leading a life unconnected with scientific research.

If there is any problem with the current Kakenhi system, it is perhaps the fact that, as "competitive funding" demands, selections are made on the basis of a fair and impartial screening. If a proposal is not presented in a reasonable manner that is comprehensible to the commonsensical members of the selection panel, it will not receive good evaluations, and will be unsuccessful in obtaining a grant. When I assess Kakenhi

applications myself, it sometimes occurs to me for an instant that the process actually be discouraging seeds of new research potentially leading to major discoveries and innovations that could shape the future of humankind. At the end of the day, however, we have to make sensible evaluations of each application within the limited time allotted.

It is thus difficult within the current evaluation system to make room for the kinds of projects that I personally cannot help being attracted to: those which appear to serve no practical purpose, but are nonetheless pursued with conviction and pride by their researchers. I sometimes indulge myself by imagining that if there were a new category and evaluation system for Kakenhi that could allocate grants to such projects, both universities and science as a whole might be a whole lot more interesting.