

The Value of Kakenhi to Research Institutions and Researchers
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Akihiro Watanabe, Head of History Section (literary documents),
Department of Imperial Palace Sites Investigations
National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Nara National Research
Institute for Cultural Properties

Although I need not mention the role that the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Kakenhi) have fulfilled in the sphere of scientific research, within the university and independent research institution settings, the significance of that role seems to have been marked by slight differences. In this essay, I would like to share some of the views I have gained through my experiences as an individual affiliated with a research institution focused in the humanities.

To most research institutions, Kakenhi is a source of outside funding that complements their limited budgets for research. Additionally, as a source of competitive funding, it can also be a measure of an institution's standing or value. These are the reasons why institutions go to great lengths to increase the percentage of their projects chosen for Kakenhi. Needless to say, fulfilling an institution's research objectives will be the principal mission of the researchers affiliated with that institution. Hence, even if such researchers receive Kakenhi for their own projects, they often find it difficult to balance their independent research objectives with the objectives of their institution, except in the occasional case where those objectives overlap. This was the situation in which I found myself 20 years ago. If you accept that the duties of your job should come first, then pursuing independent research even with grant assistance is something that has to be done in your free time, when you are off-duty. Even though it is regarded as part of your official duties, allocating a share of your work schedule to independent research will interfere with your job. That presents a huge dilemma.

However, large-scale Kakenhi are a somewhat different matter. The budgets required for research projects in the humanities are often only a fraction of the scale of funding typically demanded by projects in scientific research. Consequently, in the humanities, the need for large-scale Kakenhi usually comes with research at the institutional or multi-institutional levels, beyond the scope of individual research. Therefore such research will fulfill a role that complements the institution's public mission. Although research institutions that have been set up for a specific mission do secure research budgets for that purpose, they frequently do not have enough funding to support research on novel, creative themes.

In addition to its conventional *mokkan* database (*mokkan* were wooden tablets or strips used in the Nara period as a medium for official messages), the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties with which I am affiliated has also prepared and published an image database of *mokkan* script, *Mokkan Jiten*, as well as *Mokkanshop*, a system that aids in the reading and interpretation of *mokkan* text. These tools were made possible with the Kakenhi. Had it not been for that grant funding, these now-commonplace tools and systems probably never would have seen the light of day.

One major benefit of large-scale Kakenhi is that it has facilitated research alliances in areas that transcend institutional or field-specific boundaries. It is extremely doubtful that a database and other collaborative tie-ups between the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties and the University of Tokyo's Historiographical Institute, or the joint research with scientists on text recognition and image processing, would have been possible through research based on conventional levels of budget funding. Once established, networks for scholarly research become mutually irreplaceable assets to the institutions and individuals making them up. From the perspective of the research in which I and my colleagues have been engaged, the Kakenhi have served an immeasurably huge role.

As this suggests, alliances of multiple institutions, each utilizing Kakenhi in its own respective field of expertise, can efficiently achieve goals that no single institution acting alone would find possible. Further, through ties of mutual trust, such institutions will be able to build lasting frameworks for sustained, all-out endeavor after the initial development goals have been achieved. It would be ideal to create frameworks that can harness conventional levels of budget funding to sustain research initially funded with grants. This continuity is one of the strengths of research led by research institutions and something not readily available to research conducted by faculty members in the university setting.

Incidentally, while I have long had familiarity with the Kakenhi application screening process as a subject of screenings, recently I gained invaluable experience as an application referee. The process involves study based on consultations with attention to the findings of a document review, and, in the case of applications for large-scale Kakenhi, also includes interviews and various considerations aimed at ensuring the fairness and objectivity of the screening process itself. It probably could be described as a system that allows reciprocal screening by researchers qualified to receive Kakenhi. When I was asked if I would serve as a referee, I obliged on the understanding that it would be a gesture of gratitude for the Kakenhi I myself had received in the past.

That said, application screening is a tough job. I can readily comprehend the intentions of the applicants. However, given the highly specialized or narrow focus of modern research including that in my own field, it is fairly difficult to assess where a given research application fits within the current level or setting of the field it addresses unless it has to do with exactly the same field in which I myself am specialized. And to be honest, screening the research applications of peers and senior researchers in my field can be a formidable task. Although the screening system in its present form is not necessarily ideal, I think it is now fairly well-developed. The online application system is also easy to use. I am not familiar with the system that existed when only paper applications were accepted but the very thought of using the same approach to screen applications entirely on paper media makes my head spin. Steady, incremental improvements will be needed to make our system better, but ultimately, that process of improvement will have to depend on a reciprocal exchange of views and opinions by screeners and those being screened. Of course, the same also may be said for the way Kakenhi funding is administered in general. Among other steps, the introduction of the electronic application filing system and the multi-year Fund system have definitely helped to make Kakenhi funding more accessible.

To wrap up this essay, I would like to air a request with attention to a certain difference between the sciences and the humanities. To elaborate, for a given research period, the amount of funding required for a research project in the sciences typically will be of an order of magnitude larger than that required for a comparable project in the humanities. By contrast, the average span of research in the humanities tends to be longer and in many cases, it is difficult if not impossible to achieve desired outcomes within a period of even three to five years. My request is that the Kakenhi devote more consideration to funding longer-range undertakings that enable researchers to dig in and pursue their research on a deeper level. Time is another essential for research. This is precisely a case where “time is money.”