

On the 10th anniversary of the WPI Program



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Inaugural Chairperson of
the Program Committee of
the World Premier International
Research Center Initiative,
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Clark Kerr, the famous former chancellor of the University of California, once said that in every flourishing nation in history, there has been an outstanding university working on the cutting edge of global scholarship. Universities are places that pass on knowledge, cultivate it, and nurture those who go on to forge the future. It is essential that they possess groups of highly skilled researchers, research organizations, research facilities, and so on. These are referred to collectively as “Centers of Excellence” (COEs) and the best universities host multiple COEs that are world-famous. COEs can, of course, be found not only in universities, but also in independent research institutes and in the private sector.

Science and technology have become an important aspect of national policy since the latter half of the 20th century. One of the factors behind this has been the major structural changes in industry that occurred with increasing globalization. Organizations were established to provide advice on science and technology policy to governments, in order to further promote research activities. Efforts to proactively foster COEs are one example of this, and such efforts, referred to as “excellence initiatives,” have become increasingly vigorous all around the world, particularly from the start of the 21st century.

Several COE programs were launched in Japan as well in the 1990s, but they were not necessarily very successful. There are several probable reasons for this, including the fact that the grant periods were generally short, grants were used as research funds, and they did not receive university-wide support. Discussions were held at meetings of the Council for Science and Technology Policy (now the Council for Science, Technology and Innovation) to address this issue, and, as a result, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched the World Premier International Research Center Initiative (WPI) as the ultimate COE program. I was appointed as the inaugural Chairperson of the WPI Program Committee at its launch in 2007.

Before the launch, the committee members based in Japan gathered to decide the basic policies of the WPI Program. Firstly, it was decided that the objective of the program would be to create organizations of worldwide renown that would become centers for global intellectual exchange. Naturally it would be necessary to have large numbers of overseas researchers working in these centers, and to achieve results on a level that would grab the world’s attention. The decision was also made to ensure that approximately half of the members



of the Program Committee would be non-Japanese academics. Secondly, instead of using government funds to cover research expenses, they should be used to build up the research centers by covering personnel costs etc., and that, provided that centers passed interim evaluations, they would in principle receive support for a 10-year period. Thirdly, these centers would differ from conventional Japanese organizations by being less hierarchical and more flexible, and the centers, including their administrative structures, would aim to become models for university reform. Fourthly, the heads of the host universities or research institutes would be required to support the WPI Program and take responsibility for sustaining the centers after government support ended. Fifthly, emphasis would be placed on proposals that sought to actively develop interdisciplinary and fusion research fields, which were expected to become areas with a wealth of research potential (this was later amended slightly to support any truly cutting-edge research, even if it did not necessarily involve the fusion of different fields). Lastly, a Program Director (PD) would be assigned to oversee the program, Program Officers (POs) would be assigned to each center, and annual site visits would be made to each center.

I believe it was extremely beneficial that we decided on these policies from the very beginning. Unlike conventional Japanese COE programs, global evaluation has been given emphasis. Furthermore, the PDs and POs have been passionate in their support for the creation of the centers, and have on occasion been prepared to provide harsh criticism. Support from host universities and other organizations has also been strengthened, with much effort being made to enhance research facilities. Moreover, large numbers of overseas researchers are now active at each of the centers and the resulting cosmopolitan atmosphere has, albeit gradually, begun to influence the host universities. As a result, the program is now widely recognized and appraised. The research performance of the centers, which is of course the most important factor for COEs, has earned an extremely favorable reputation, both in terms of objective performance indicators such as research publications, and in terms of the evaluations of the international members of the Program Committee. It therefore brings me great joy to see that the first decade of the program is regarded by so many as a success.

What is most important, however, is the program's future. First we need to look back and take stock of the last 10 years, hold discussions on our future vision for the program, and determine the path we need to take. Another important issue to consider is what requirements we should set for new WPI centers. We also need to decide what advice and support to give to centers that are no longer a part of the program. Moreover, in a reversal of situation in the aforementioned quote by Clark Kerr, it may be no exaggeration to say that the state of WPI and other COEs in Japan could even decide not only the future of scholarship in Japan, but also the prosperity or decline of the entire nation. This is the true aim of these proceedings that cover the first 10 years of activities, and I hope that as many people as possible will take time to consider the state of academia in Japan and the role of COEs in this.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all of the Program Committee members; the PDs and POs; university presidents; everyone working at the WPI centers, especially center directors; MEXT; and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS).