

Along My Grants-in-Aid Path

Toshiyuki Kono

Professor of Law, Kyushu University



I began my career as a researcher at a time when it wouldn't have been unusual to hear somebody say that because they were a day late in buying a house the price had shot up several million yen. It was at the peak of Japan's bubble economy. Everybody was saying that business was brisk, and profits spilled over into the university in such forms as donations. Looking back, it was an era that would defy the imagination these days. One day back then, a long-time colleague came to my lab. Before leaving, he was adamant in telling me how the worth of a university can be judged by its collection of books, making it important to acquire a steady flow of Grants-in-Aid for purchasing them. That large universities stock large volumes of books did not alter his view, rather it prompted him to want them to collect even more, particularly by rigorously purchasing old books. Possibly due to his influence, as a fledgling researcher I tried to apply for a Grant-in-Aid under the category Encouragement of Scientists—and was selected. It made me happy to feel that I had been so quickly recognized as a full-fledged researcher.

After that, Japan's economic bubble burst, leaving private funding foundations with lower interest earnings on their endowments and making cuts in university budgets permanent. In the aftermath, Grants-in-Aid became, as they remain, indispensable to advancing research. I'm very thankful to that colleague of mine who taught me the value of Grants-in-Aid at an early stage of my career.

In ensuing years, I was fortunate to be selected with relative frequency when applying for Grants-in-Aid, though the grants I received were normally rather small in amount as I was plodding along by myself in pursuing research on private international law. This hit a turning point, however, when I went to Germany to do research in the 1990s. By way of advice, my host professor told me, "The world is entering a period of globalization, so you should advance your research from a wider perspective and present the results at international conferences." At that time law research in Japan was, and still is, inward looking. Being literary and comparative in character, it delved minutely into the system and state of law in specific countries such as Germany and France.

It was at this juncture that the WTO was established in GATT's Uruguay Round. That accelerated the movement to Europeanize German law. Given how it had become impossible to grasp the impact of globalization on law using a traditional comparative approach targeting one country, what I was advised to do was to take a multidisciplinary approach while actively generating research from Japan and advancing a bidirectional dialogue. It wouldn't be possible to pursue research on such a grand scale without Grants-in-Aid—in fact, without large grants at that. However, except for certain special categories, Grants-in-Aid were mostly limited to travel within Japan and had various restrictions placed on their usage.

Preparing applications for both a Grant-in-Aid and funding for international joint research doubled the amount of paperwork required for report writing and the like; nevertheless, I was able to initiate a project carried out by an all-star team of Japanese researchers. After that, I took on the formidable task of organizing a large project under the Grant-in-Aid category Scientific Research on Priority Areas.

Though I gradually gained the ability to initiate and advance large-scale projects, my way of thinking about Grants-in-Aid was to take a radical turn. This happened when I was placed on loan to the Research Center for Science Systems within JSPS, where I served as a senior program officer. When I say I was “on loan,” it doesn't mean that I was commuting to the Center every day—I worked there in a part-time capacity. However, my position did require me to travel to Tokyo from Kyushu every week.

Before formally starting work at the Center, I was asked to observe its operations. So, in February I repaired to the Center's Ichiban-cho office to audit its meetings. Frankly, I was astounded, wondering what kind of place I'd come to when hearing the members of those meetings—researchers on the cutting edge of Japan's science—clashing with each other in fierce debates. At the time, I rarely had a chance to communicate with researchers in other fields, being isolated as I was like an “octopus in a pot,” to use a Japanese metaphor. So, I was greatly stimulated by those debates among the leading researchers, who were taking on the world in friendly rivalry. I recall the blank amazement I felt when one of them said, “Law might be studied as the object of what other's make. Wouldn't that be interesting?”

At the Center, I had gone from being a rather comfortable user of Grants-in-Aid to a person who now bore weighty responsibilities for buttressing important components of the system. My position engaged me in a wide range of tasks from holding policy discussions on the state of research funding to editing the handbook for grant applicants and carrying out a campaign to promote the Grants-in-Aid program nationwide. In that process, I realized all the more vividly how important a role Grants-in-Aid play in supporting Japan's scientific research; and in the case of the humanities, how they are the exclusive means by which researchers can carry out large-scale projects over several fiscal years. I could plainly see, therefore, how the research community needed to jell together in improving and developing the Grants-in-Aid system. The work of Center gives impetus to that kind of thinking. While I was there, the Center's program officers, backed by JSPS's diligent staff, made substantial strides in their efforts to enhance the Grants-in-Aid program while busily engaged simultaneously in their own research activities.

At the Center, I was able to get to know many researchers from other fields. I felt especially privileged to be able to work with the physicist Yoji Totsuka, who had served as the Center's director. One day I happened to see a magazine with Dr. Totsuka's name on the cover, so I bought it. In it was a dialogue between him and the essayist Takashi Tachibana on cancer therapy with accompanying data. In their discussion, Dr. Totsuka said that his work at the Center would be his "final public service." Reading it, I recalled seeing him walking down the hallway of the Center with some sort of attached medical device. Finishing the article and vacantly staring at the still-open page, I suddenly got an email message from the Center's administrative office, saying that Dr. Totsuka had passed away. It is easy to say that Grants-in-Aid are important, but Dr. Totsuka showed how precious they are with both his body and soul. Knowing him has been my most valued personal encounter along my Grants-in-Aid path.

At the Center, I was blessed with an opportunity to study the research-funding systems of other countries. For example, Germany has a multi-tiered system—with DFG supporting domestic research, AvH carrying out international research and exchange programs, and DAAD supporting the international exchange of students and young researchers. In all of these programs, research funding is allocated in an amount equivalent to several hundred million yen per researcher. In the humanities, the Leibniz Prize is presented to individual researchers. I got the strong sense that these funding innovations work to incentivize German researchers working in fields of the humanities. Under AvH's Humboldt Fellowship, overseas researchers are invited to work in full-time positions at German universities.

Shifting perspectives, it became plain to see that intense international competition exists among science-funding systems. Given the realities of this environment, it will be necessary to enhance and expand yet another notch the Grants-in-Aid program, which lies at the heart of Japan's overall research-funding system. In the future as well, I must ask myself what I can do to help achieve this imperative.