



Hokkaido — the northernmost major island in the Japanese archipelago — is renowned for many things: abundant agriculture, excellent seafood, cold winters, and numerous hot springs.

And in recent years, the prefecture has also come to be known as a hotbed for research administration. This past September over 500 URAs from 125 institutions across Japan gathered in Sapporo, on the campus of Hokkaido University, for a record-breaking two-day national symposium. 20 breakout sessions were held and 81 posters presented, and a supplemental workshop for sustainable collaboration among URAs, organized by members of Hokkaido University, was held on the afternoon of the last day. Even this meeting drew over 200 participants, who engaged in discussions about the state of URAs in Japan.

Research Administration in Japan 500 and Counting: Japanese URAs Gather for Annual Symposium

By David H. Kornhauser and Shingo Ebata

URAs head north

URA-like positions have evolved rapidly and grown quickly in number and variety since the first such national meeting was held in 2009, with just 48 participants. In Hokkaido this time, each of the many breakout sessions (most standing-room-only) had nearly that many participants, with the hallways bustling during the breaks, the poster area noisy with activity, and the main banquet (at the end of the first day) a grand event held in one of the city's famed beer and mutton barbecue halls.



Above, URAs gathered at the opening plenary

Right, Symposium organizers at a picnic lunch discussion, including coauthor Shingo Ebata (front)



Host Hokkaido University's president kicked off the meeting, followed by a speaker from the education and science ministry MEXT, who gave participants an overview of what the government sees in URAs. As it turns out, this is quite a lot: URAs are being expected to play a key role in fostering science and technology innovation, thereby helping maintain Japan's economic position in the world, as well as promote scientific integrity and ethics, all while laboring under university administrative systems that haven't quite yet caught up with how to effectively manage positions bridging the lab to office gap.

A storm of parallel sessions followed in half-a-dozen breakout rooms, including investigations into increasing institutional competitiveness, dealing with Horizon 2020, challenges facing research support for the humanities, working with international media to broadcast research news, effectively supporting research teams crossing national boundaries, and making effective use of analytical tools. An update was also presented on efforts to establish an accredited training curriculum for future URAs.

Behind the smiles and polite bows

This being Japan, not a lot of handshakes took place. Instead, mountains of business cards were exchanged, and as in any such meeting, networking was one of the main purposes of the gathering.

All of the politeness and friendly greetings belied, however, that in many ways URAs are still something of a new entity in Japan's academic world. The number of solutions to the question of what URAs should do (and how they might relate to the larger organization) almost seems to match the number of hosting institutions. And universities across the country struggling with tight budgets are scrambling to find relatively reliable budget mechanisms for URA programs.

The government's various education and research funding initiatives have helped (at least temporarily) ease monetary burdens for many universities, but truly long term financial security for URAs remains elusive, with many later choosing to return to research, where greater support exists at least for those fortunate enough to secure tenured positions.

And there are larger issues at play as well, resulting from differing groups of universities having received certain differing ministerial block grants, creating institutional clusters that sometimes (but not always) work together. This presented something of a challenge for symposium organizers, who were required to juggle the needs of separate groupings vying for session rooms and speaker slots.

But luckily a certain degree of harmony returned by the end of the conference, with Shinshu University, in centrally-located Nagano Prefecture, stepping forward at the last minute to offer to host the next symposium in 2015, and plans taking shape for a preliminary meeting of an actual national research administration organization, to begin deliberations in coming months.

Teething pains— but a bright outlook

All in all this is an active and exciting time for URAs in Japan, and this feeling was reflected in the lively participation at the Hokkaido symposium. Universities are feeling squeezed by declining budgets and (for many at any rate) gradually declining enrollment, but these circumstances only serve to highlight the sort of innovative funding and outreach solutions that URAs can bring to the research community.

And as their numbers grow, Japan's URAs will diversify further, increasingly looking beyond the country's shores to contribute more to international efforts, and find partners to creatively expand the frontiers of research.

There's no telling just yet how many research administrators will attend the 2015 Nagano symposium, but it is certain to be at least as vibrant and boisterous as this past Hokkaido meeting, which will certainly be fondly remembered by all who attended. ■



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Overflow crowd at a breakout session.

Training Programs for Middle/Senior Level University Research Administrators (URAs) in Japan

By Keiko Okano

In order to further develop our URA system, MEXT aims to train middle (5 to 10 years experience) and senior (more than 10 years experience) level URAs, so that they can take the lead in advancing their operations and organizations. MEXT chose two universities to build such training programs - Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology (TUAT) and Kanazawa University. In the Annual Symposium, we got to have a sneak peek of the still-in-the-making programs.

TUAT program concentrates on management of RA organization (within an institute) and of highly specialized RA operations (IP, tech transfer, and international). Having already implemented some URA training courses in one of their graduate courses, they seem to have established their own style and value the differences between URA systems in Japan and those in other countries.

Kanazawa U. also has management as one of the main pillar of their program. However, their management encompasses university as well as research projects. In addition, they will work on planning research strategy and research projects.

Both programs involve discussions and exercises/working groups. My impression is that TUAT gears toward more practical knowledge and skills, and Kanazawa U. uses lots of conceptual or sometimes even philosophical discussions. Although I am too early at my URA career, either of them are important and appealing to me, and I am looking forward to hearing from them about how the programs went.

NCURA at its Annual Meeting and at the PRA/FRA conferences also have senior-level discussion groups and concurrent sessions and discussion groups that are aimed at advanced level research administrators. There may be possibilities in the future for NCURA's offerings to complement the Japanese training programs, and the faculty of the TUAT and Kanazawa U. programs may potentially be a welcome addition to NCURA's future programs.



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