



Willingness of research supporters

Junko KAWAMURA

Director-General, Private Education Institution Department, Higher Education Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

In the sporting world, the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games was held this year, and that will be followed by the London 2012 Olympic Summer Games. These days, it seems that virtually all athletes in their TV interviews close their remarks by saying “your support would be very much appreciated” after having expressed their ambitions. This is not a bad thing because direct and indirect supports from various people are essential for a single athlete to win a game, including livelihood or spiritual support from team members, with whom the athlete does daily exercise, through to spectators who cheer him or her on at the stadium.

Support from many people is also necessary to continue experiment-type research over a long duration. It is necessary for a research setting to be provided; for equipment and materials to be produced, delivered and precisely maintained; for research hours to be ensured; for opportunities of presenting research results to be given; and for intellectual property to be maintained and utilized. Each of these requires manpower. Research budgets, including those covering costs of the above-mentioned matters, must be properly obtained. There are so many kinds of people supporting research other than the technical staff members who are very close to the researchers.

I once worked with a man who was a veteran accounting officer at the administrative office of a university. “By whatever means, I would quickly find and get a cheaper light bulb than any one else even if the difference was as small as one yen,” and this is his philosophy, showing his dedicated attitude to researchers. Whenever he heard that researchers he was supporting had revealed revolutionary data at an on-campus workshop or received any off-campus award, he would privately raise a toast to their achievement. He was a heavy drinker and sadly he died before reaching the age of 60. Anyway, researchers had understood and trusted his stance of making the most of research expenses effectively to facilitate as many experiments as possible.

I also encountered some youths striving to master policy studies while working. After having mastered space engineering or biochemistry at graduate school, each of them has been employed as a supporting staff member by a certain research institution, respectively. These youths express their wishes to create the best atmosphere for researchers to show their abilities.

The research supporter segment is thinner and less diversified in Japan than in Europe and the United States. In fact, the number of supporters to one researcher is about 0.27 persons in Japan, which is less than half of the average of the figures for EU member countries. In terms of the number of “supporting staff to one university faculty member,” the average rate of five prominent US universities including Harvard University is 7.6 persons, while the corresponding figure is 2.2 persons at the University of Tokyo.

There are many motives for pursuing a research supporting professional career, and there are also various ways to refine knowledge and skills. Many research supporters should be produced across the country with each of them doing an excellent job in his or her area of assignment, so that every research base in Japan can demonstrate its strengths as a team. And I would like to see researchers treating their research supporters with appreciation as expressed in the phrase “your support would be very much appreciated,” since researchers are expected to consider their supporters as partners to grow together. This is because, in my opinion, whether the willingness of people who aspire to becoming research supporters bears fruit richly or such willingness is discouraged and withers away will depend heavily on the awareness of researchers.

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The *Kagaku to Kogyo* (Chemistry & Chemical Industry) Editorial is responsible for the English-translated article.