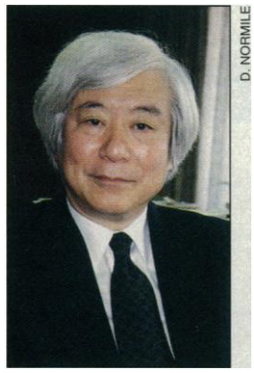
JAPAN

Support Builds for Curbs on Lifetime Faculty Posts

TOKYO—When Akito Arima became a lecturer in the University of Tokyo's physics department in 1961, he was guaranteed a job for life. Over the next 3 decades, free from worries about job security, Arima pursued an illustrious research career at Tokyo, winding up as president of the university. Arima's track record might seem like a strong endorsement for Japan's system of lifetime employment, which is the law at national universities and tradition at most private companies. But Arima himself has been among the most persistent and vocal critics of the practice, especially for academic scientists, on the grounds that it stifles creativity. "Instability," Arima says, "is very good for stimulating [researchers]."

Now Arima's long campaign to change the system is on the verge of a significant victory. Last fall, a committee he chairs recommended to the influential University Council of the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (Monbusho) that national universities be given the freedom to decide whether to adopt limited-term appointments and which faculty members would be affected. This fall the council is expected to endorse the concept. If the plan makes its way through the entire government bureaucracy, the universities could be allowed to hire faculty members on limited-term appointments by as early as 1998.



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On the move. Tokyo's Yoshikawa says greater job mobility is needed.

Ministry officials see the move as part of a larger effort to deregulate higher education and make it more flexible. They believe that short-term appointments might encourage greater job mobility among academics and begin to break down what Takafumi Goda, planning director for Monbusho's Higher Education Bureau, calls "a lot of inbreeding" in university departments. Last spring, for example, the University of Tokyo's Faculty of Medicine hired its first faculty member who was a graduate from a different university. The ministry is now urging universities to publicly announce openings and to try to recruit more women and non-Japanese.

But Monbusho can't do it alone. Limited-term appointments would require a change in national laws that fall under the jurisdiction of the ministries of Labor and Home Affairs, and their endorsement would be needed to win approval from the Diet. The law that applies to employees of the national government, for example, stipulates that government employees cannot be hired on a temporary basis. In effect, this gives lifetime employment to all employees of the national government, which includes all ranks of faculty at the national universities. Employment conditions at private universities are governed by a labor standards law under the purview of the Ministry of Labor, which does permit 1-year faculty contracts for as long as 3 years. One question that must be answered is why university faculty should be made an exception to national practice; making that case, says Goda, could be "very difficult." Next year would be the earliest the Diet could discuss any new laws, which would take effect in 1998.

In the meantime, some institutes and university departments, particularly in physics, have used informal agreements to loosen their lifelong bonds to researchers. The most notable example is the Institute for High-Energy Physics in Tsukuba, where virtually all physicists are hired with the understanding that they will move on after 5 to 9 years. Although thought to be on shaky legal ground, similar arrangements—often applying only to assistant professors, the lowest rung on the faculty ladder—are in place at other institutions, including Kyoto University's Research Institute for Fundamental Physics and the University of Tokyo's Institute for Solid-State Physics and the physics department. Monbusho's new plan would give legal standing to such arrangements and, proponents hope, increase their usage.

In addition to cultural and legal barriers, the practice of limited-term employment must also overcome the dearth of opportunities for researchers in some fields. Hiroyuki Yoshikawa, president of the University of Tokyo, thinks that some physics departments have embraced the concept because of a tradition of job mobility in that field. "The physics job market is huge, and it's international," he says. "But the situation in engineering is completely different," he adds.

For engineers, he says, there is neither the tradition of spending time overseas nor the attraction of big facilities not available at home. Japanese companies prefer to hire engineers with master's degrees and train them, and there is little movement between academia and private industry. Under the circumstances, Yoshikawa says, it would be "unreasonable" to impose limited-term appointments on all departments, even for assistant professors.

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Keeping active. Keio's Nakamura swapped lifetime post for "more active" control of his research agenda.

Advocates of limited-term appointments fully expect those circumstances to change over the next several years, however. Indeed, some younger researchers have already seized on the more favorable attitudes toward employment mobility to carve out a more exciting career path. Osamu Nakamura was hired as an assistant professor in the computer center at the University of Tokyo after earning a Ph.D. in computer science at Keio University and working for 2 years in software research at Ricoh Co. Although his job at Tokyo was guaranteed for life, he gave it up for a 3-year appointment as an assistant professor at Keio, which has taken advantage of its status as a private institution to impose such restrictions on all assistant professors.

Nakamura acknowledges that his University of Tokyo position had greater prestige and security. But he says that Keio offered him the cutting-edge research he was looking for. "I wanted a position where I could actively pursue my own research," he says. Come this fall, however, Nakamura must find a new job if he wants to continue his work on developing new types of networking software. And he admits that the prospect of job hunting is already making him a bit anxious.

If Arima had his way, Nakamura's career path would become the norm in industry as well as academia. He says he had hoped his subcommittee would come up with stronger directives on ways to implement limited-term appointments at universities that would set the pace for increasing job mobility among Ph.D.s in the private sector. "Once universities succeed in introducing such jobs, national institutes will introduce them; then I have no doubt that laboratories in the private sector will also adopt such policies," says Arima, now president of the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research. Such "tough" measures are needed, he believes, to ensure that Japan's growing public research expenditures are spent wisely and that industry has the talent it needs to compete globally.

–Dennis Normile