

Call for opinions: Japan faces severe science budget cut

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The research program at High Energy Accelerator Research Organization (KEK) is facing a grave possibility of a severe budget cut, as recommended by the recently issued Public Budget Review by Japanese government. This affects Japanese renowned research programs including the ones hosted by KEK, such as elementary particle physics and related fields in astrophysics, material and life sciences. More than 260 universities and laboratories attend these programs. I would like to take this opportunity to explain to you what KEK is doing to enhance its research and education programs, and also would like to solicit your opinions.

Science has played a crucial role in our society, contributing to our understanding of the world around us, and supplying knowledge bases to develop innovative technologies. The Japanese science community has made remarkable contributions to this effort. This is clearly seen in the Nobel Prize-winning works by Yukawa and Tomonaga in the past, and by Nambu, Kobayashi, Maskawa and Shimomura in 2008. These achievements have only been possible through public understanding of the importance of basic research and the support by our government.

KEK is an "Inter-University Research Institute" that supports research programs with an emphasis of advanced, large-scale particle accelerators as the primary research platform. KEK has engaged in a wide range of research activities, such as the studies of the missing antimatter and the neutrino mass, the search for new materials for industrial applications, the structural protein analysis of influenza virus, the development of catalyst to be used for clean automobile engines, and others.

KEK hosts around 6,000 visiting scientists annually from more than 160 universities and 100 laboratories, as well as 1,000 scientists from more than 50 countries. KEK is one of the major accelerator laboratories in the world to host global-scale, collaborative research programs in accelerator related science.

KEK also provides more than 5,000 young students annually from elementary, mid-high and high schools as well as from colleges and universities with opportunities to acquaint themselves with the cutting edge research environment at the leading particle accelerators. KEK's accelerator has provided the experimental confirmation of the Nobel Prize-winning Kobayashi-Maskawa theory, which continues to inspire young generations. It is a place for future scientists and engineers to get hands-on experience with the ongoing science by attending lectures and trying experiments. These experiences stimulate their interests in science, and help them think about their career.

Needless to say, the wise use of funding and time available is our responsibility of utmost importance. It is particularly so in the difficult economic situation that we all face now. Unfortunately, the public review of the Japanese national budget in November, 2009 resulted in a recommendation that the "Special Educational and Research Fund" is to be significantly reduced. This funding accounts for more than 50% of the KEK's annual budget. If this reduction happens as per the recommendation, scientists at and around KEK would lose the research opportunities and a major outflow of research talent to overseas might ensue. Future recovery from this set-back could easily take years, and require greater amount of budget than the amount cut next year. Neglect of the importance of fundamental research could result in a long-term stagnation of our national competitiveness.

We do our best to serve scientists from across the nation and around the world, to carry out the high-quality research programs with cutting-edge technologies by maintaining the world-class research facilities.

We would like to hear your thoughts on our research programs. Please use the form below to tell us that you think by December 10.

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