

# Germany a model for univ. reform

## Bundestag's move to bolster elite tertiary centers offers lesson for Japan

By Norihide Miyoshi

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Out of fears that Germany could be left behind in the global race for academic excellence, the German government has stepped in to help some top-notch universities compete with the leading universities in Britain and the United States.

The German government's decision to promote university reform by providing subsidies to a handful of promising universities was prompted by a belief that a uniform system covering higher education, a dominant principle in postwar West Germany, could no longer work.

In a laboratory building at Munich University of Technology in the center of the city, a research team is engaged in development of robot cognition systems. As a robot scampered around a room, recognizing obstacles and dodging them, research head Dirk Wollherr halted the reform efforts, saying, "If we didn't get the €6.5 million [about ¥1 billion] annual subsidies, it would have been impossible to conduct large-scale research of this kind."

The initiative to support elite universities in Germany dates back to 2005. The government entrusted an independent committee comprised of experts with academic backgrounds to select promising universities for extra funding. After receiving applications from universities, the committee spent about a year conducting screenings and, in October 2006, announced it would back Munich University of Technology, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and Karlsruhe University of Technology in Karlsruhe.

Tertiary institutions deemed to have excellent clusters of researchers, good graduate schools and viable plans for the coming five years can qualify as an elite

university. Qualifying universities receive a total of €1.9 billion over a five-year period.

During the screening process, criteria such as whether the university has a system in place to allow it to conduct advanced research for a set period and whether research conducted by the university likely will be highly recognized internationally in five years.

Regarding the elite university project, Munich University of Technology President Wolfgang Herrmann said, "It's an attempt to break down the egalitarian ideology that had been dominant in Germany."

From the 19th century to early 20th century, Germany played a leading role internationally in the fields of science and technology. But from the late 1960s, its universities became less elitist, and the grading and comparing of universities came to be regarded as inappropriate. In this period, however, Germans became concerned that the quality of education at universities was deteriorating.

German weekly Der Spiegel, in an August 2005 issue, reported on the deterioration of German universities, saying that even University of Heidelberg, considered to be Germany's finest, was ranked only the 47th in the Times Higher Education Supplement, a British survey of universities. The report also noted only four Germans were awarded a Nobel Prize between 1995 and 2004, compared with 44 American laureates.

Herrmann said capable researchers and students have been flowing out of Germany universities, while competition in attracting leading students from Asian and African nations has been intensifying.

The initiative to make Germany universities comparable to Harvard University and Oxford University is driven by a

strong sense of urgency about falling standards, which is shared by German universities.

Herrmann said the designation of Munich University of Technology as an elite institution resulted in major changes: "Our university has been the focus of growing attention, with most of the attention coming from abroad rather than at home," he said. "Some teaching staff have returned from abroad."

This year, six universities including University of Heidelberg and the Free University of Berlin started to receive government subsidies. Altogether, nine universities are now playing leading education and research roles in Germany.

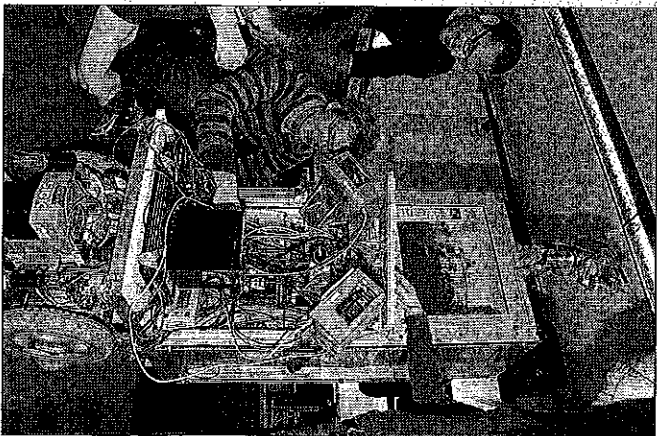
But strong criticisms of the reform efforts have been voiced by those who say the funding will result in entrenched differences in standards between universities deemed elite and the rest.

The government intends to evaluate whether the nine universities have significantly improved their international recognition when the five-year term for subsidies ends. But the government has yet to compile long-term guidelines on the project to indicate, for example, whether elite universities will continue to be newly designated or even whether the funding should continue.

It is therefore not known whether the project will result in an invigoration of all German universities.

Citing another hurdle to be overcome, Herrmann said, "Since even salary levels are determined by law, problems remain when trying to obtain accomplished faculty staff."

Japanese universities face challenges similar to those faced in Germany, such as improving international competitiveness. In addition to pursuing greater in-



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Researchers at Munich University of Technology conduct robot research.

dependence for universities by turning them into incorporated bodies, the government has started working toward the establishment of internationally competitive research hubs by allocating necessary funding, as happens in Germany.

A project known as the 21st Century Centers of Excellence Program started in fiscal 2002, and has been joined by the World Premier International Research Center Initiative.

Japan should follow with keen interest how Germany's university reforms are carried out to help improve tertiary education here.