

## UK-Japan exchange

# Go East young man

Tokyo

GIVEN the near-impossibility of finding any kind of academic post, most young UK scientists would find it hard to believe there is a source of extraordinarily generous post-doctoral fellowships that never attracts enough applicants. But, according to new figures from the fellowship scheme operated by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science and the Royal Society of London, this is exactly the case.

The fellowships are available to support study in Japan's universities, many of which now boast enviable facilities, and would enable a foreigner to live in comparative luxury. A generous tax-free monthly stipend of nearly £1,000 (¥270,000) is provided, along with a monthly housing allowance of up to £350 (¥100,000) which would cover most of the rent of a reasonably spacious apartment in Tokyo, and to add icing on the cake there is an annual allowance of a further £350 (¥100,000). All of this is topped off with a round-trip airfare from Britain to Japan. But despite these incentives, only 32 of the 60 awards, which are for one or two years, have been taken up in the first six years of operation of the scheme: scarcely 50 per cent of the posts have been filled.

So what has gone wrong? Britain's figures make a poor showing when compared with identical schemes operated in West Germany and France. In these countries, all but one of the available fellowships have been taken up, and in 1983, for example, there were 35 qualified applicants for the eight fellowships open to French scientists.

Royal Society officials say the lack of applicants is due to the extremely tight situation for academic posts in Britain — few young scientists are willing to risk leaving Britain for the Far East for one or two years; they prefer to be on the spot for any "new blood" openings that might come up. But the employment situation is surely no better in West Germany and France.

Part of the problem may lie in fear of the unknown — language barriers and apprehension about the state of scientific research in Japan may deter potential applicants. It is true that any foreign scientist coming to Japan must accept that he or she does so as a "guest". On the plus side this means that a visiting scientist need not follow the gruelling work schedule of his Japanese counterparts, although some attempt to conform is expected — young Japanese scientists typically work 12 hours a day six or seven days a week. On the negative side, permanent posts in Japanese universities are virtually closed to foreigners; in 1982, government regulations were changed to allow the appointment of foreign nationals to university staffs in spite of their status as civil servants, but only two

foreigners have so far been appointed as permanent members of staff in Japanese national universities. But British scientists who have ventured to come to Japan under the fellowship scheme have not regretted the move, according to John Richards, science officer of the British Council in Tokyo.

Maybe the real problem is that information about the scheme has not been widely enough disseminated in Britain. In France

and West Germany, several organizations are involved in the selection procedure. In France, for example, many scientific organizations (such as CNRS and INSERM) and two ministries have representatives on the selection committee, and perhaps this more broadly based involvement of scientific and government bodies helps to draw in more applicants.

Those who criticize Japan for putting up barriers should recognize that here is a situation in which Japan has opened its doors to foreigners but few are taking the opportunity to walk in.

David Swinbanks

## Asbestos

# Claims centre in sight

Boston

IN the face of mounting legal costs and jammed court dockets, a group of asbestos manufacturers and insurance companies is setting up an out-of-court processing centre to handle the claims of the thousands of workers who claim to have been injured by exposure to asbestos.

After two years of negotiations, the Asbestos Claims Facility, to be based in Boston with a branch in San Francisco, will be born officially on 29 May. So far, 33 manufacturers — including the Manville Corporation, which filed bankruptcy three years ago in anticipation of financially-crippling liability judgements — and 22 insurance companies have agreed to participate.

More than 23,000 cases are now pending in state and federal courts, with about 500 new suits filed each month. A Rand Corporation study estimates that manufacturers and their insurers have already spent \$1,000 million to settle asbestos-injury claims over the past ten years, with the companies' and plaintiffs' legal expenses consuming 61 per cent of that total; legal expenses were threatening to escalate even further as the manufacturers and insurers began suing each other to determine who was responsible for paying off the successful plaintiffs. In joining the Asbestos Claims Facility, the companies have agreed to drop those battles. The insurance companies will provide the first several hundred million dollars (the exact amount is not yet certain) to pay off claims; if the insurance funds are exhausted, the manufacturers will shoulder the remaining financial burden.

Workers who choose to bring their claims to the facility will have to submit certain standard information, including employment and medical records. They will have to establish that they have suffered asbestos-related injury, such as asbestosis, and that they were exposed to asbestos-containing products made by at least one of the participating manufacturers. Facility staff will then try to negotiate a settlement. Failing that, the next step will be an offer to enter into mediation — binding or

nonbinding — with a neutral third party. If an agreement still cannot be reached, the worker will be free to take the case to court. The facility will provide legal defence on behalf of all the companies in those cases.

Claimants, who were consulted by the companies in planning the facility, stand to gain by having their cases heard much more quickly than is now the case and by lower legal costs.

Thomas Henderson, a Pittsburgh lawyer whose firm represents 500 plaintiffs, says he is cautiously optimistic.

The Reagan Administration, which has resisted calls for government intervention in asbestos cases, has been more lavish with its praise. The establishment of the facility, says Office of Management and Budget general counsel Michael Horowitz, "demonstrates the ability of the private sector to resolve serious national problems without reliance on the government to dictate and enforce its own agenda".

Tom Burroughs

## Universities clouded

THE most gloomy statement yet of the prospects for British universities was uttered last Friday by the person best qualified to judge, the chairman of the University Grants Committee (UGC), Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer. In a statement to a joint meeting of UGC with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, he said that the failure of Sir Keith Joseph to refer to UGC's advice on higher education last November in a recent open letter "must be a bad sign" and a proof that the advice had been rejected.

In money terms, Swinnerton-Dyer said, the British government was expecting the universities to accommodate budget erosion of 0.5 per cent a year while asking them "to do new things". But, he guessed, the new system of cash limits would amount to a cut of 2 per cent a year. At this rate, he said, it would be necessary either that university departments or that whole universities should be closed. □