Japan’s new premier chases innovation

TOKYO
In a departure from tradition, Japan’s new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, has appointed a vocal supporter of science, Kiyoshi Kurokawa, as his special adviser. The two men promise to reform dramatically Japan’s rigid structures of scientific education, funding and decision-making, in order to boost technology and innovation in the country. But with hard details lacking, some observers are left wondering how much will really change.

Abe took over the premier job from Junichiro Koizumi in late September. He is expected to continue Koizumi’s reforms of science policy, including making universities more competitive and increasing career opportunities for young researchers and women.

But in a surprise move, on 3 October Abe appointed Kurokawa, former president of the Science Council of Japan, as the cabinet’s special adviser. Kurokawa is the first such adviser with a science background — his four predecessors were economic or legal experts. The motive seems to be a desire to boost the economy without falling back on tax cuts, which are unpopular in Japan. “I think the prime minister is aware that he needs a scientific adviser,” says T. Eisner.

Kurokawa. “To keep growing, we need innovation in science and technology that can totally change society, like the Industrial Revolution and the Internet.”

Hiroyuki Abe, a member of the Japan Council for Science and Technology Policy and former president of Tohoku University, agrees, adding: “Kurokawa is the best choice because he’s been calling for innovation and reforms at the top of academia.”

Among other things, Kurokawa will help to create Innovation 25, a plan to forecast what society’s needs will be in 2025, and suggest what research should be done in medicine, information technology and the environment to meet those needs. The push gives greater impetus to the direction Koizumi wanted to move in while he was in office. A team led by Kurokawa is expected to complete the plan by around June next year. It won’t include any detailed policy recommendations, but could pave the way for increasing funding and overhauling the grant system, while reforming education and research systems to make them more flexible.

Ikuo Kabashima, professor of political science at the University of Tokyo, says that...
changes could start coming into effect once Shinzo Abe has ensured the stability of his administration after an upper-house election scheduled for the summer next year. "Calling for innovation as a drive for economic growth sounds better to the public than tax cuts," he says. But he warns that conservative ministries and universities are likely to put up quite a fight rather than lose their current powers.

Researchers will also take some convincing about the reforms. Fujio Masuoka, a professor at Tohoku University and the inventor of flash memory, is sceptical about the likelihood of reform. He has experienced rejections from various ministries over the past few years, when applying for funding to create a three-dimensional semiconductor chip. He gave up three years ago and started working with a company in Dubai instead, which invested ¥10 billion (US$84 million) in his project. "Whenever we want to try new things, we hit a wall because a consensus of several reviewers is needed and that system makes it hard to evaluate unique research properly," says Masuoka. "I don't expect anything to change in Japan."

Ichiko Fuyuno

Currency of science: technology innovation is seen as central to Japan’s economic growth.