

What is “Policy for Science”? : Interview Series #1
Interview to Dr. Takashi Shiraishi, Director, SciREX Center

This is a brief summary translation of the article on the interview to Dr. Takashi Shiraishi, SciREX Center Director that appeared on the online journal “Academist Journal.” The original is here (<https://academist-cf.com/journal/?p=10166>) in Japanese. This is the first of a series of 4 interviews on “What is ‘Policy for Science’?”

Q: What is “Science for Policy?” What is the purpose of the SciREX program?

A: The phrase of “Science for Policy” first appeared in the Japanese Government’s 4th S&T Basic Plan (2011-2015). I was one of the members of the Council for S&T Policy (presently it is Council for Science, Technology and Innovation: CSTI) at that time, and was ensured that the most important in policy making is “distribution of funds.”

Compared with other countries, the decision-making system for distributing the government funds is not coordinated in Japan. Most of the Japanese S&T policies are collections of individual policies established at the level of division or unit directors. For example, when you ask each division or unit director “why did you implement this policy?” they answer “because it is important.” However, when they are asked “which is more important between Policy A and Policy B?” they do not have an answer.

Our mission is to provide the base for policy formation and decision making, and evidence for decision. Some of you may take “Science for Policy “ as the process of applying scientific knowledge on policies, but the policy decision making process itself cannot be answered by science. The most appropriate word would be “trans-science.” So, the purpose of SciREX program is to provide such data and analysis results that would help the policy makers to rely on in making decisions, and also to provide discussion opportunities among them.

Q: What is unique with the SciREX program?

A: The SciREX Center is enhancing “co-evolution” of “policy formation” and “research” by trying to bridge between them. It is ideal for the researchers to pursue their research based on their curiosity, which I understand as a researcher. However, when it comes to science for policy, it should not go that way. The research that the researchers promote based on their

curiosity may not always get along with the policy makers.

There are many papers on policymaking published by think tank organizations, but it is hard to say that most of them are actually well used in making policies. It is because the researchers who belong to universities and think tank organizations do not have sufficient information exchange with the policymakers. In other words, they do not have a clear understanding on how the decisions are made. This is why we ask SciREX researchers to maintain interactions with the policymakers and understand what the issues are for them. By incorporating the issues the policy makers are concerned into the research, the researchers can expand their research. For example, the researchers may come up with Question C that includes both Question A and B. The researchers can grow this way. Thus, it is important to facilitate an environment where policymakers can frankly talk with researchers.

Q: Would you show me some activities of SciREX program?

A: We are enhancing various activities on a trial and error basis. One of the examples is the development of the “SciREX Policymaking Intelligent Support: SPIAS” system. It makes it possible to view such information on S&T research funds, competitive funds by JST and NEDO, patent, papers, and press release by giving key words to the system. You can, for example, obtain the information on what kind of research funds Dr. Yoshinori Ohsumi has received and how he used the research results and came to receive the Nobel Prize. This system would be extremely helpful for the policy makers and researchers in grasping and discussing the S&T trends.

Q: What is the ideal image of the SciREX Center in the future?

A: There are not many government employees or politicians who are passionate in making the S&T policies. Under such circumstances, I am interested in establishing a “policy community.” The SciREX program has an opportunity to have discussions with the incumbent administrators once per a few months. I would like to continue this effort. For now, we are doing various activities from which I wish to see a successful case in the future.

Q: The way to try on various ideas, find a successful case, and pursue it to grow sounds similar to the development process of basic research. Lastly, would you give a message to young researchers who are concerned with S&T policies?

A: I wish them to expand their networks, for example, by applying for the RISTEX funds (for SciREX) or visiting the research projects they are interested in. If they have a chance, it would be good to experience the administrative work to see the policy decision making process for a

few years. As it takes an important and productive time for the researchers, it would be necessary to design an incentive that compensates the period. This remains an issue we have to solve.