



OIST iEPR2026 Report

Report of the 3rd International External Peer Review





OIST International External Peer Review (iEPR) 2026

PURPOSE

Building on the previous review cycles (2015 and 2019–2020), the OIST President convenes an external panel to conduct an institution-level external peer review to evaluate readiness for its second phase of growth towards becoming a world-class university.

SCOPE

Research and education performance,
Interdisciplinary research ecosystem,
Intellectual capital, innovation partnerships,

Governance effectiveness,
Financial sustainability,
Fundraising capacity.

Meeting Schedule

- March: The 1st Meeting
- April: The 2nd Meeting
- May: The 3rd Meeting (Working Meeting for iEPR members only)
- June: Interviews on community services and engagement
- June: Presentation of preliminary findings and recommendations by the iEPR 2026 to the BOG
- July: Full iEPR 2026 report (EN/JPN) delivered to the OIST President
- August: Submission of iEPR 2026 report (EN/JPN) to the Cabinet Office
- October: Full presentation about the iEPR 2026 to the BOG meeting



OIST iEPR2026 Members

- **Prof. Steven Chu***

Stanford University (USA)

* Nobel Prize Laureate in Physics (1997)

- **Prof. Cynthia Friend (Emerita)**

Harvard University

Kavli Foundation (USA)

(resigned in May)

- **Prof. Robert Langer**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)

- **Prof. Jens Nielsen**

BiolInnovation Institute (Denmark)

Chalmers University of Technology (Sweden)

Prof. Hideo Ohno

Tohoku University (Japan)

Prof. Robert Perich

Swiss School of Public Governance

ETH Zurich (Switzerland)

Prof. Thomas Rosenbaum

California Institute of Technology (USA)

Prof. Donatella Sciuto

Politecnico di Milano (Italy)

Chair of the CAO External Review Panel
attended as Observer



OIST iEPR 2026 Report

Following interviews held
online, March - May 2026

The panel's overall judgement is unequivocally positive.

“OIST represents an indispensable asset for Japan’s scientific and economic future.”

“OIST has validated its founding model, demonstrated world-class research performance, and built the institutional foundations for the next phase of growth.”

“OIST Model is highly effective, but its long-term robustness will depend on scaling strategically to build critical mass.”

“The priority now is to scale thoughtfully — strengthening selected research clusters, securing adequate stable funding, and preserving the culture that underpins everything OIST has achieved.”



Executive Summary

Overall Assessment

- OIST has firmly established itself as Japan's only university that **competes credibly at the level of the world's leading international research institutions***.
- Its **distinctive model** — no academic departments, a PI-centered structure, English as the official language, and fully global recruitment — **has proven to be a durable competitive advantage**.

Principal Recommendations

- **Pursue strategic growth to 200 PIs** while preserving OIST's core culture of autonomy, interdisciplinarity, and intellectual ambition.
- **Define a focused set of research themes** — using the Open Centers model — to build genuine critical mass and global leadership rather than pursuing broad coverage.
- **Ensure core facility budgets and equipment renewal plans scale with faculty growth**; this infrastructure is a decisive factor in attracting top international talent.
- **Develop a transparent framework communicating the real purchasing power and quality of life benefits of OIST positions to offset the weak Yen.**
- **Actively promote social interaction and community-building on campus** to strengthen informal scientific collaboration.

* More than 12% of OIST publications rank in the top 10% most-cited globally, nearly double the Japanese national average. OIST's research performance (normalized by size) benchmarks favorably against its closest international peers such as ISTA (Austria), Rockefeller University (USA), and the Weizmann Institute of Science (Israel).



Concluding Recommendations (1 of 2)

- OIST has developed into a world-leading research institution by any meaningful measure, yet it remains below the critical mass required for long-term sustainability and for achieving even stronger positioning internationally.
- The quality of its science is not in question; what is needed is scale sufficient to build intellectual depth within key research domains, ensure continuity and renewal across disciplines, and fully realize the innovation and educational potential of the OIST model.
- OIST stands out as the only Japanese university capable of competing with the world's top-tier research institutions, despite its small size of approximately 100 principal investigators (PIs). Its citation impact — with over 12% of papers in the top 10% globally cited — significantly outpaces all other Japanese universities.
- The department-free, PI-centered organizational model is praised for enabling genuine interdisciplinary research, while recruitment and evaluation processes are considered rigorous and internationally benchmarked.
- OIST has built a strong and rapidly maturing innovation ecosystem that is already making a measurable difference to Okinawa's economy and to Japan's scientific reputation.
- This trajectory of innovation ecosystem-building should be recognized and supported as a core institutional achievement, not merely a secondary output of the university's research mission. This requires also specific support in corporate relations management that should be provided by OIST to the PI's.



Concluding Recommendations (2 of 2)

- **The Panel strongly supports OIST's continued expansion toward a faculty of approximately 200 principal investigators, which the panel considers the necessary threshold for sustainable operation at the level of ambition OIST has set for itself.**
- The panel emphasizes, however, that the path to growth matters as much as the destination: expansion must be managed strategically, with a clear focus on building critical mass in selected research areas, maintaining the academic culture that underpins OIST's distinctiveness, and ensuring that core facilities and research support keep pace with faculty growth.
- A larger OIST, built on these foundations, would represent one of the most compelling investments in research excellence and innovation that Japan could make. However, scaling while preserving OIST's distinctive culture of interdisciplinarity and research intensity is identified as the central challenge for the institution's next phase.
- Therefore, it is important to focus on selected research themes rather than broad expansion, investing in core facility renewal, and addressing financial vulnerabilities — particularly the impact of the weak Japanese yen on faculty salaries and the competitiveness of its recruitment offers.



Scientific Focus and Growth Areas

- **Articulation of Core Research Areas and Clusters in the Next Phase of Development**

Rather than pursuing broad coverage across all scientific domains, OIST should identify a focused set of themes where it can build genuine critical mass, intellectual depth, and global recognition.

The Open Centers initiative represents a promising structural mechanism for achieving this, provided the centers are selected strategically and allowed to develop dynamically.

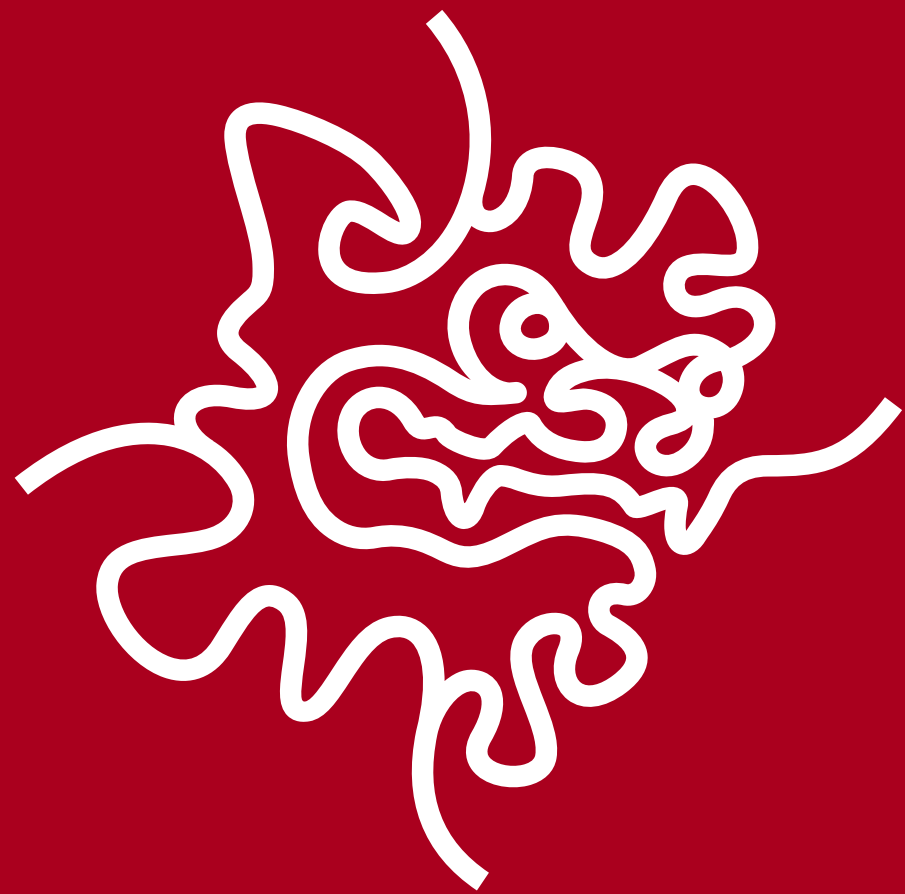
- **Further Development of Research with Okinawa's Distinctive Advantages and Local Relevance**

OIST can combine scientific excellence with Okinawa's distinctive natural and cultural environment in ways that no other institution can replicate, and they represent a powerful argument for OIST's unique contribution to both regional and national priorities.



Reference to OIST 5x5

- The newly suggested Open Centers presented in the OIST 5x5 plan (Neuroscience & AI, AI in Biotechnology, Programmable materials and Photonics, Climate-Resilient Coastal and Food Systems, Biodiversity & Ecosystem resilience) are a promising mechanism for coordinating interdisciplinary work at scale, focusing on national scientific strategic priorities as the university grows toward 200 PIs.
- Core facilities are state-of-the-art; a long-term plan for equipment renewal and cost-recovery is recommended.
- OIST is also planning to introduce some cost-recovering for use of the core facilities, in particular to prevent over-use. In the long-term it is, however, important to make plans for ensuring sustainability of core facility operations that consider not just financing for support staff, but also regular renewal of equipment.
- The OIST 5x5 plan aims at increasing the baseline of stable external funding by 5% per year, through external competitive funding, philanthropic donations and industrial cooperation.



Thank you



Additional information



A Unique and Indispensable Value Proposition

- **International scientific excellence:** OIST produces research of outstanding quality as measured by citation impact, journal placement, and international recognition, outperforming all other Japanese universities on key bibliometric indicators and benchmarking favorably against its closest global peers.
- **Fundamental and interdisciplinary science:** structural feature of the OIST model is not easily replicated by traditional universities and constitutes a lasting source of differentiation.
- **Innovation and economic impact:** research demonstrates that innovation scales with faculty size, making the case for institutional growth not just an academic argument but an economic one. The investment multiplier effect of the continued public investment in OIST yields significant returns to the broader economy.
- **Impact for Okinawa and Japan:** OIST contributes directly to Okinawa's development through job creation, science education, and the anchoring of a high-technology innovation cluster. It simultaneously serves Japan's national interests by providing an internationally visible research institution capable of competing for global talent and participating in major international science programs.



The Importance of Academic Culture

- This is a defining but sometimes underappreciated dimension of OIST's success.
- OIST has cultivated an environment of intellectual ambition, openness, and mutual respect — one in which researchers from diverse backgrounds and disciplines can collaborate freely, pursue high-risk questions without departmental constraint, and be evaluated on the quality of their science alone.
- This culture is not incidental; it is carefully constructed and actively maintained.
- It is what enables OIST to attract researchers who have many options globally, and it is what sustains the university's scientific vitality.
- As OIST grows, preserving this culture must be treated as a strategic priority, not an afterthought.
- **The governance and management structures developed to support expansion should be explicitly designed to protect the conditions that make OIST distinctive.**



Differentiating Factors Relative to Other Japanese Universities

- **Global recruitment and international openness:** With English as the working language and no national preference in hiring, OIST draws faculty and students from across the world. More than 80% of PhD students are international, representing over 70 countries. *No other Japanese university operates at this level of genuine internationalization.*
- **Department-free structure:** The absence of traditional departments eliminates disciplinary silos and creates structural conditions for interdisciplinary collaboration that other universities cannot easily replicate.
- **Research intensity and citation impact:** Over 12% of OIST publications appear in the top 10% most-cited papers globally — a figure that is nearly double the national average for Japanese universities and approaches the level of some of the world's most respected research institutions.
- **Advanced core facilities and flexible research funding:** The combination of state-of-the-art shared infrastructure and direct funding to individual research units enables researchers to pursue ambitious scientific programs without the bureaucratic constraints typical of larger institutions.
- **Highly selective doctoral education:** OIST's PhD program, with an acceptance rate of approximately 3%, is among the most selective in the world. Its graduates go on to leading academic and industry positions globally, serving as ambassadors for OIST and for Japan's scientific capacity.



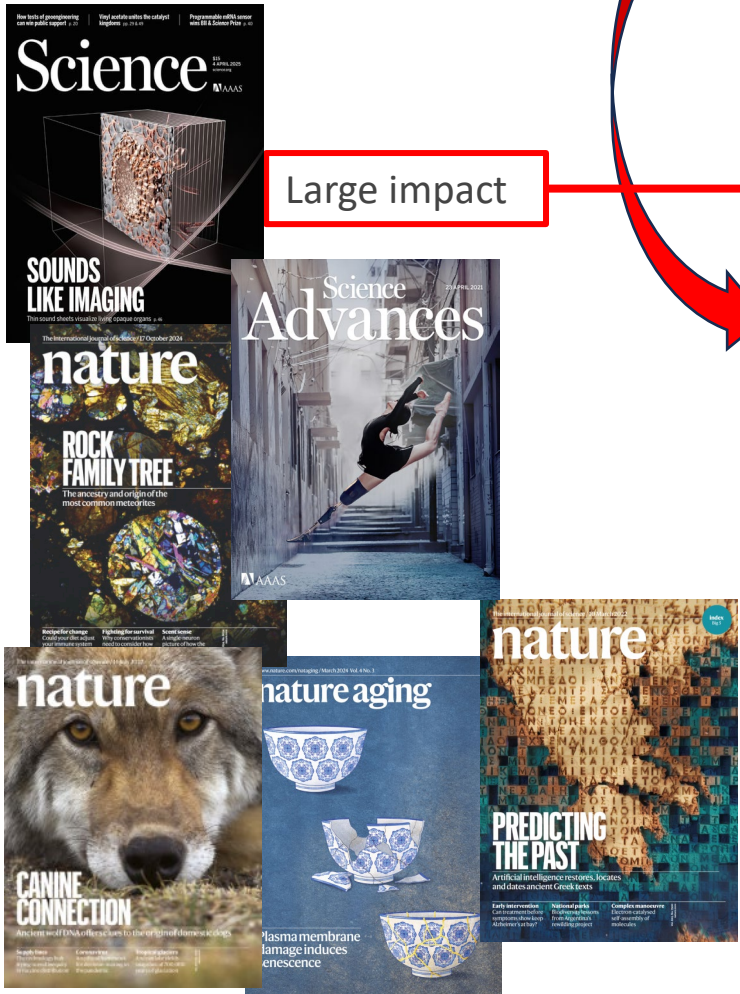
Reference Materials



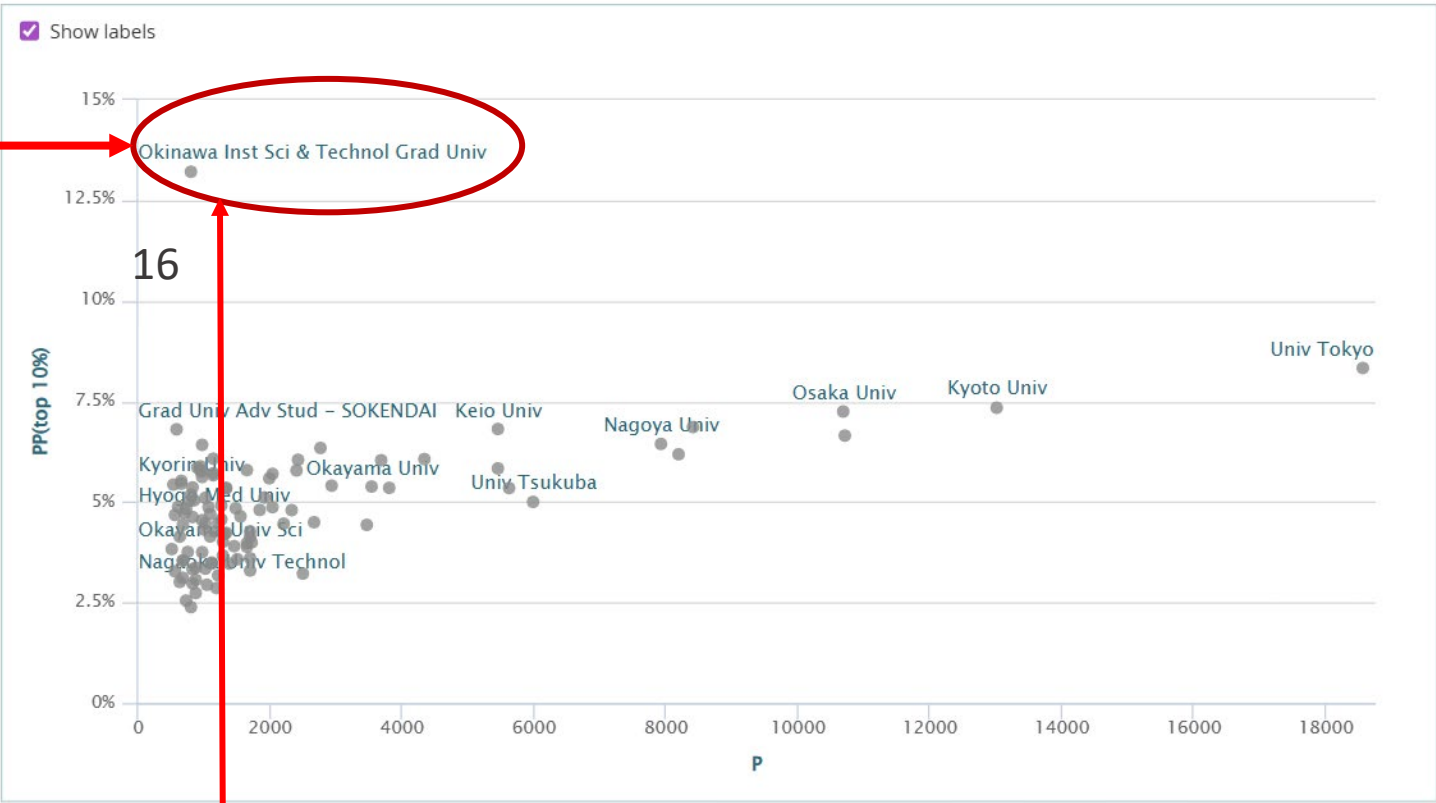


Science Impact of OIST

FEATURED PUBLICATIONS



The proportion of a university's publications that, compared with other publications in the same field and in the same year, belong to the top 10% most frequently cited

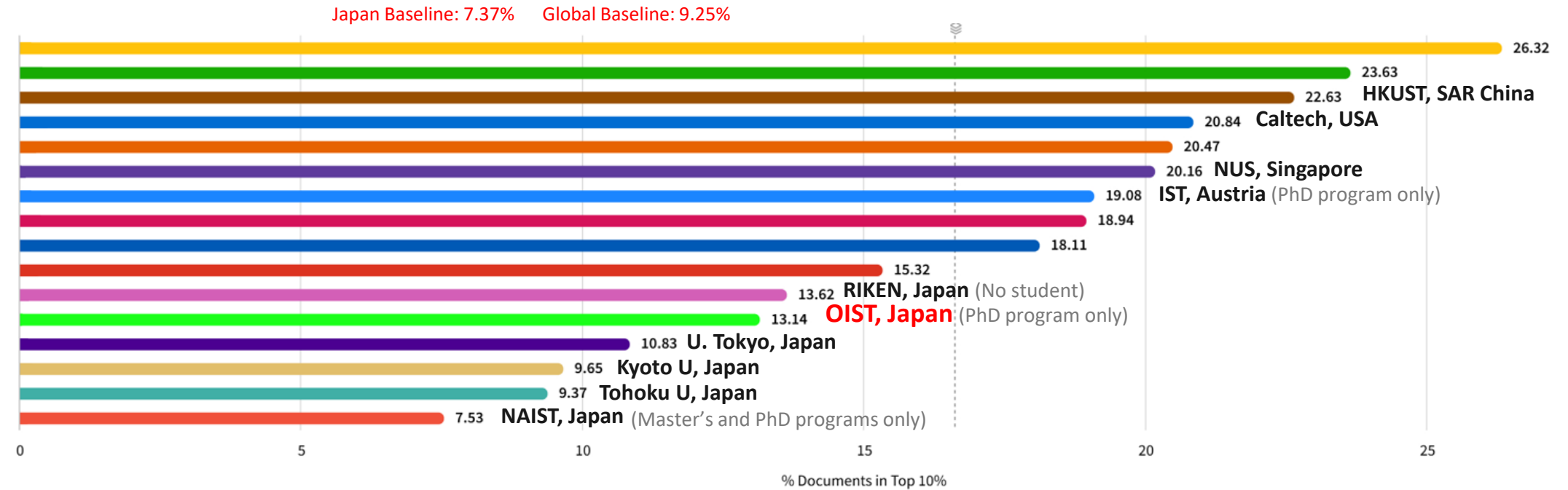


CWTS, Leiden index 2025



Benchmarking OIST Research Performance with Global and Japanese Research Universities

The Percentage of Research Publications in the Top 10% (2021-2025)



Indicator: % Publications in Top 10% Most-Cited. **Time period:** 2021 – 2025. **Schema:** Web of Science

Exported Date: April 17, 2026

InCites dataset updated 2026-03-27. Includes Web of Science content indexed through 2026-02-28.



Selection Criteria for iEPR 2026 Members and Their Charges



Selection Criteria for iEPR 2026 Members

iEPR Membership

Each member must meet at least 2 of the following criteria:

- Internationally distinguished scientist in the natural sciences or any STEM field with extensive peer-review experience with international and national research and innovation funding councils (e.g. ERC, NSF, UKRI, JSPS)
- Former or current president/vice chancellor of world-leading universities
- Former or current directorate of internationally distinguished research institutes, including translational research institutes
- Scientific founders of several startups across the career span, based on fundamental scientific or engineering breakthroughs originating from academic research.
- Current managing director or vice president for administration in nationally top- ranked universities, overseeing areas such as finance, human resources, or IT.



Charge

1 Governance and Management of Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem:

Evaluate the organization of academic structure, policies, and mechanisms currently in place to ensure the quality and productivity of OIST research units and interdisciplinary research collaborations.

- Has OIST established an effective organization structure optimized for fostering interdisciplinary research and functional as required to be competitive with world-leading research universities?
- Has OIST established policies and mechanisms to ensure the quality of disciplinary excellence of research units while supporting research clustering and collaborations within OIST and with external partners?
- How resilient can be expected of the interdisciplinary research ecosystem at OIST as the university grows from 100 to 200 PIs?



Charge

2 Research and Education: Evaluate the scope, quality, and international competitiveness of OIST's research and PhD education programs.

- Has OIST established a scientific portfolio that features novel, innovative and high-quality research and education?
- Are the breadth and depth of that scientific portfolio and collaborations appropriate for research and PhD education of OIST's current size?
- Are the research support services and research infrastructure installed at the Core Facilities adequate for supporting scientists at the leading edge of research?
- Has OIST recruited high-quality faculty who are globally competitive, regardless of their Japanese or international academic backgrounds?
- Has the OIST Graduate School organized a PhD curriculum including professional and career development training opportunities that are suitable for students who aim to become leaders in science and technology in academia and private sectors?
- Has the OIST Graduate School established effective outreach strategy and methods to ensure access to highly quality and capable PhD students and stay connected with the OIST alumni?



Charge

3 Intellectual Capital, Technology Transfer, Entrepreneurship and Innovation: Assess whether appropriate mechanisms are in place to translate and capitalize basic research discoveries from OIST that have global implications and with national and local relevance.

- Has OIST established an effective administrative infrastructure and mechanisms to identify and generate intellect capital from basic research discoveries within research units and support entrepreneurial endeavors?
- Has OIST established a credible portfolio of intellectual capital, industry collaboration, and partnerships with the public and private sector?
- Are the scientific field coverage and engagement of knowledge exchange and technology transfer activities appropriate for the size and research strengths of research units?
- Has OIST developed translational research and applications derived from local Okinawan specialties and managed partnerships to be aligned with local, regional, and national innovation ecosystem priorities?



Charge

4 Organizational Structure, Administration, Buildings & Infrastructure: Examine the development /maturity of organizational structures, internal processes, buildings and infrastructure necessary to support the next stage of growth.

- Has OIST established effective administrative structure and management for university operations?
- Is the OIST management sufficiently prepared to handle risks, protect the health and safety of university community members, and address research integrity and security that are associated with conducting world-class research and education responsibility?
- Does OIST provide IT services, computing and networking environments, and information security management as competitive as international research university peers?
- Has OIST established effective recruiting and retention programs that ensure access to high-quality administrative staff while mitigating potential hurdles that are specific to Okinawa?
- Has OIST developed campus-wide plans for buildings and physical infrastructures to support interdisciplinary research and education and other mission-critical university operations in the second phase of growth?



Charge

5 Sustainable Financial Base, External Funding, and Resource Planning: Assess the funding sustainability of OIST and external funding strategy.

- Does the OIST leadership have the means (e.g. personnel, infrastructure, and funding) to develop and implement a multi-year strategy?
- Has OIST established mechanisms to plan annual budget, manage overhead from research grants, and monitor financial risks?
- Has OIST strengthened support functions and deployed incentives for achieving targets in external funding strategy 2024-2029?