

'More effectiveness needed' in Brussels' handling of research

KEITH DOBNEY

[LONDON] Research ministers from member states of the European Union (EU) have been asked to consider a set of measures proposed this week by the European Commission in Brussels to improve the effectiveness with which research programmes are managed.

One of the commission's suggestions — drafted in response to pressure from EU member states for a more imaginative and innovative approach to research management — is a regular 'benchmarking' exercise comparing its performance against that of other research organizations.

The ministers also want those actively engaged in research to be more involved in setting up research programmes. And the commission is proposing a pilot experiment on how the management of grants aimed to increase the mobility of research workers in Europe might be devolved from Brussels, giving more autonomy to host institutions.

The proposals were submitted on Tuesday 28 April by Edith Cresson, the commissioner responsible for research and education, to a colloquium in London attended by more than half of the 15 EU research ministers.



Battle: keen to see greater user input



Cresson: accepting pressure for change

Although hosted by the British government — which holds the chair of the Council of Ministers — the meeting was held primarily at the suggestion of Claude Allègre, the French minister for research, technology and education.

It reflected a feeling that, now that the budget of the Fifth five-year Framework research programme (FP5) has been approved (see *Nature* 391, 729; 1998), the time is ripe to turn a more critical eye on how effectively the programme is managed.

Allègre, for example, has suggested ways in which responsibility for day-to-day management might be devolved away from Brussels to organizations in member states. Other changes in the organization of European-level research have been discussed among the heads of the research councils of EU member states, who meet regularly as the group known as Eurohorcs.

The day before the London meeting, Eurohorc representatives met European Science Foundation (ESF) officials in Strasbourg to discuss how the two bodies might work together to advise the commission on the use of EU research funds.

No decisions were taken at the meeting. It was agreed, however, that the ESF (whose members also include non-EU states) would explore how such closer collaboration might work in practice; for example, whether it should set up a small secretariat for Eurohorcs in its Strasbourg offices.

Brussels officials are said to be watching such developments closely, aware both of the scope for more effective management of individual programmes through devolution, but also of the danger of diluting the 'added value' which, they argue, comes from operating through the commission. Some are also said to be concerned that devolution might reduce their own authority.

Prior to Tuesday's meeting, John Battle, Britain's science minister, said that the ECU14 billion (\$15.5 billion) for FP5 represented "a huge amount of money which must be managed carefully and transparently".

Some of the ideas being discussed reflect the general approach to research management that the British government is keen to see adopted in Brussels.

The idea of 'benchmarking' performance by comparing it with that in other countries, for example, has attracted a strong following both in the Office of Science and Technology and in university funding councils.

Indeed, the commission itself has already responded to such interest by emphasizing, in a statement issued on Monday, that a recent study by Andersen Consulting shows that its administrative costs "compare favourably [original emphasis] with those of other European and national research organizations".

Following Tuesday's meeting, the commission will put forward proposals on how it intends to respond to the ministers' demands for more effective management of research funds at the next formal meeting of the EU research council in Brussels on 22 June.

David Dickson & Alison Abbott

Physicists seek definition of 'science'

[WASHINGTON] The governing council of the American Physical Society (APS) has rejected the first draft of a statement defining science for the public, which the society's public affairs panel has been preparing for three years. According to an official familiar with the discussion, some members were concerned by a proposed reference to "other approaches" to understanding nature.

Others are said to have been worried about public misunderstanding of the statement's references to "falsifiability". The authors of the draft 200-word statement have been asked to confer with scientific societies and other interested parties before coming back with a new version later this year.

The case for such a statement has been recently confirmed by opinion polls showing that public belief in forms of pseudoscience — such as faith healing and astrology — is growing in the United States. But the rejection of the draft, although not unusual for such a policy statement, illustrates the difficulties that scientists face in trying to draw a recognizable line between their own work and pseudoscience.

The statement, entitled "What is Science?", defines science as "a disciplined quest to understand nature in all its aspects"

and explains that it demands both "open and complete exchange of ideas and data" and "an attitude of scepticism about its own tenets".

It stresses that scientific results must be capable of reproduction, modification or falsification by independent observers. And it closes by noting that "scientists value other, complementary approaches to and methods of understanding nature"; but that "if the alternatives are to be called scientific, they must adhere to the principles outlined above".

Following the draft's rejection by the council at a meeting last week in Columbia, Ohio, the APS may now draw up two statements — one for wide public dissemination and the other a more rigorous explanatory statement for scientists themselves.

The society decided to produce the statement in response to the concerns of key members that 'pseudoscience' is not only winning increased public attention but may even be causing confusion among science students. APS members have been active in criticizing this trend not just in cases related to physics — such as the alleged discovery of 'cold fusion' — but also in other fields, such as alternative medicine.

Colin Macilwain