Catalonia wants greater control of institutes

Barcelona. The government of northern Spain's autonomous region of Catalonia has offered to take over the running costs of the 13 institutes in its area of the country's Council for Scientific Research (CSIC), which is currently under financial pressure.

The move is part of a bid by Catalonia to integrate the research programmes of the CSIC institutes, at present funded and controlled by central authorities in Madrid, into its own regional science and technology plans. But these authorities are resisting any significant reduction in their influence.

Run by a centre-right coalition government, the region is seeking to develop a less centralized system for supporting research and development than in the past. Its goal is to move closer to the German model, where individual *Länder* share with central government responsibility for both funding and directing the work of research institutes.

Discussions have been taking place for more than a year between officials from Catalonia's Commission for Universities and Research and those from the Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) — on whom CSIC depends — in Madrid. Both sides confirm that an agreement is likely to be

reached by the end of the year.

CSIC has more than 200 permanent researchers and another hundred visitors and undergraduates in Catalonia. Some of the CSIC institutes in the region are among the best in Spain. In the area of biology, biotechnology and biomedicine, for example, the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo in Barcelona is CSIC's most productive institute in terms of scientific output, and its third in terms of size.

Three factors lie behind Catalonia's bid to take on increased responsibility for local research activities. The first is a feeling that although the central government has done much in recent years to boost the country's scientific capabilities, it has been less successful in transferring results to industry — and that this can probably be best done on a regional basis. "We are reaching a glut on the supply side. We need a change of focus in order to find ways of ferrying people — and ideas — to the productive sector, because the question now is to satisfy their demands", says Josep Laporte, head of the commission.

As part of its own efforts, for example, the regional government plans to inaugurate

two so-called 'reference centres' later this month — one in biotechnology and the other in food sciences — to act as focal points for research groups in fields being given priority. Three more centres, in new materials, environment and advanced manufacturing, will be created next year. Each will aim to stimulate the transfer of innovative technologies to industry.

The second factor is Catalonia's feelings that its regional needs are not being properly met by Madrid. Joan Albaiges, who resigned as the CSIC's delegate in Catalonia to become the commission's director-general of research, points out that Catalonia now provides as much money as the central government to the support of research and development in the region. Its research plan has a budget of Ptas 6,800 million and will grow 3 per cent next year despite a general cut in local administration of 20 per cent.

But he says that the distribution of funds unfairly favours institutes close to the centre. "The state gives us 12 per cent of its total for R&D and 42 per cent to Madrid. But our scientific production represents 21 per cent of the total and Madrid's only 30 per cent. This is ridiculous," he says.

The third factor is political. Last June, the Socialist party failed to win a majority vote in the general elections. As a result, it has had to rely on the votes of Catalonia's nationalist coalition in order to approve the national budget for 1994, and is likely to require its support in passing other legislation. Agreement on the CSIC centres appears to be a concession that the Socialists have made to ensure this support.

Last year, Catalonia asked Spain's constitutional tribunal to require the central government to devolve responsibility for research (including the work of CSIC institutes) to its autonomous region, but the bid was rejected. "Now, we want to achieve the same through negotiation," says Albaiges.

Elias Fereres, state secretary for universities and research, accepts that the new agreement will mean increased involvement by the local government in the activities of the CSIC institutes. (A similar agreement has already been reached with the region of Andalusia, which includes Seville.) But he denies that the agreement would result in any way in a devolution of powers to Catalonia on research.

"It is just a question of coordination with their plans," says Fereres. He argues that, under the terms of the proposed agreement, CSIC's programmes in Catalonia would be "oriented" by the autonomous government, but would not be directed by it.

"The agreement would not mean reducing the central government's budgetary responsibilities; it is not our intention to reduce our financial support of CSIC", says Fereres. **Luis Angel Fernández Hermana**

Europe takes its science out to the people

Paris. The European Commission organized a "week for scientific culture" last week to encourage the public to take a greater interest in science. Top prize in meeting this objective must go to the Italians, French, British and Czechs, who targeted the Nintendo generation with a multimedia event in Trieste (Italy) linking science fiction movies and comics, documentaries and celebrities.

CERN packed crowds into its underground particle-accelerator for an open day, and added some culture with a ballet (right) on the Big Bang in Geneva's Grand Casino. The United Kingdom went for smaller numbers, but compensated by targeting the young and impressionable, inviting 350 children for a sleepover at London's Science Museum.

Others interpreted the theme liberally. Spain and Italy organized a conference for businesspeople, scientists, administrators and journalists (but apparently not the public) on saving the Mediterranean. And only France could have held a debate between philosophers, historians and scientists under the title: "European Science in Self Question".

Events with less enigmatic — if more prosaic — titles include a conference in the Netherlands on "The responsibilities of industry in science education", and a debate in Strasbourg organized by the European Science Foundation and enti-

itled "Chemistry without prejudice — a day to reconcile the public with a science which is omnipresent but misunderstood in daily life."

The prize for self-promotion must go to the European Union's four Joint Research Centres (JRC) in Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. These invited three journalists from each of the four countries to explore JRCs in the other three.

Declan Butler