

Czech's streamlined academy

Prague & Brno. The Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was founded in 1952 by the communist government, on the standard Soviet model. It comprised a series of research institutes, whose number had grown to 87 by 1989, and a learned society whose members supposedly included only the country's most talented scientists, but which in practice was deeply corrupted by politics.

Researchers at the academy did not have a bad life, although contact with the Western world was limited. The communists revered science which, they considered, would eventually solve all society's problems.

The academy was relatively free from ideology during the communist years. Indeed, it had been a sanctuary for scientists considered too politically incorrect to work in close contact with students at the universities. But, after the velvet revolution, the academy found itself less popular. It had to rethink its role quickly, and purge itself of the communist influence pervading its top echelons.

The first move came in 1989, when the academy declared itself an independent body, entirely free from state control. At the same time, it abandoned its discredited role as a learned society: it remains the only academy in central eastern Europe to have taken such a step. Most of the members of the general assembly were replaced and the new assembly voted in a new president, whose appointment was confirmed by the government. This independence and the new democratic structure were enshrined in a new act in 1992.

That has not been accomplished without pain. Among other things, the academy had to fight off a strong movement to dissolve it altogether and to merge its institutes with universities. But in retrospect, that was the easy part. Continuing reform proved more difficult.

Scientists became increasingly impatient of the failure of the academy's new presidium to deliver the required, and promised, structural reforms. Staff levels had fallen by not much more than a quarter, and independent evaluation of research at the institutes had not been systematically applied. Most of the staff that had left had simply found better jobs abroad or in the newly developing private sector. No institutes had been closed.

The academy was still distrusted by many as a privileged elite. It had no real friends in government and its increasingly obvious reluctance to get to grips with reform lost other support. Then the government slashed the 1993 budget by 15 per cent.

That announcement in the autumn of

1992 was accompanied by another shock: following a decree by the government that all state employees must prove they had had no connection with communist Czechoslovakia's secret police, Vladislav Hančil, one of the academy's first democratically elected vice-presidents, admitted that he had previously been an informer.



Rudolf Zahradník.

There was a crisis and the academy's general assembly demanded a new presidium. Jiří Velemínský, a plant physiologist, temporarily took the reins. By January 1993 he had seen through a fast, tough evaluation of the quality of research at the academy's institutes, carried out internally. Twenty per cent more staff were dismissed and 24 institutes were closed down completely.

Rudolf Zahradník the current president, is equally uncompromising in his attitude towards reform, instituting four-year cycles of entirely independent evaluations of each of the academy's 58 remaining institutes. The evaluation committees comprise half foreign scientists (mostly from Western Europe, to keep travel costs down) and half from Czech universities. The evaluation of 16 institutes began this autumn; the rest will be complete before the end of Zahradník's term of office in February 1997.

Pleased with his own success, Zahradník is critical of the many applied research institutes and universities in the Czech republic that have not yet institutionalized their own reforms. "The state gives applied research CKr3 billion every year, more than twice the academy budget, but there is no check on how effectively the money is spent. It makes my head reel", he says.

But morale is at last improving. Milan Bezděk, director of the Institute of Biophysics at Brno, says that he is optimistic about the reforms. In 1989, the academy

had 12,501 staff, 7,854 of whom were scientists. It now has just over 7,000, of whom 4,780 are scientists, 16 per cent of them with tenure. "The reductions look dramatic", he says, "but the quality of research is now much higher."

Zahradník is also happy, and says that the streamlined academy is functioning happily and efficiently. His one regret, however, is that the academy's budget is too low, which means that it can offer young scientists only very low salaries. That makes science unattractive to the brightest of the new generation, he says.

The privations seem fated to continue. Next year, there will be an eight per cent increase in salaries for all public employees, including academy scientists, but there will be no increase in the academy's general budget, which is being eaten away by an inflation rate of around 10 per cent.

Meanwhile, the government's promise, earlier in the year, of a gradual increase of spending on basic research by 20 per cent in real terms has been delayed, pending a more favourable economic climate.

Zahradník is 66 years old. He wants to spend what remains of his career finalizing the reform of the academy. At last month's fifth general assembly, he proposed the establishment of a new institute, for molecular sciences. "This is when you know a research society is working — when there are births as well as deaths", he says.

Alison Abbott

What's in a name?

Shortly after the velvet revolution, the very name 'Academy of Sciences' was anathema to Czech scientists. It recalled uncomfortable memories of when people were forced to work under the 'Soviet model': separation of research from teaching and control of research by the communist state. They were also conscious that the name engendered political distrust, and therefore lack of political support.

But times change. Earlier this year, Rudolf Zahradník, the current academy president, proposed that the academy's name should be changed to the National Science Centre. He thought it might appease the politicians, the public and the West. In any case, he also wanted the title of academy for the new learned society he is involved in creating, to bring it into line with Western learned societies.

Surprisingly, the idea attracted virtually no support. "Scientists feel that it has become our trademark", says Jiří Velemínský, head of the Institute for Experimental Botany. The stigma is no longer felt. Scientists abroad have also confirmed that the name is now happily associated with quality science in democratic central eastern Europe. □