

Irish panel will advise on science funding . . .

Munich. Pat Rabbitte, Ireland's new Minister for Commerce, Science and Technology, has set up a task force to implement some of the 160 recommendations made in a comprehensive review of science in the Irish Republic that was published this week.

Although Rabbitte makes no specific commitment to new money — the report itself suggests in particular a major increase in support for basic science — his response has been given a general welcome by the scientific community.

The report was commissioned after a year-long campaign by Irish scientists criticizing the absence of a national science policy and the fact that, in an effort to tie research more closely to the needs of industry, state funding for basic research had been brought to a halt.

It was prepared by the Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council (STIAC), which was set up in February last year and is made up of six academics, nine industrialists and three civil servants. The panel was chaired by Dan Tierny of the Cross Chemical Group.

Rabbitte says he "agrees enthusiastically with the thrust of the report". But he says that he will not necessarily be using it to form the basis of a white paper, as promised by his predecessor Seamus Brennan. "This could only delay implementation," he says.

Instead he has set up a task force, chaired by John Travers, the chief executive of Forfas, the government's advisory board on industrial development, science and technology policy, to prioritize the recommendations of the study.

The Travers committee will report to a cabinet committee made up of Rabbitte and the ministers for finance, agriculture, fisheries and education. Rabbitte hopes that implementation of agreed measures will begin before the end of the year.

. . . as scientists dispute grant process

Munich. Ireland's major grant-giving body, Forbairt, has been come under fire from the Irish Research Scientists' Association (IRSA) for the way in which it handles its basic research programme.

A survey by IRSA of scientists who received Forbairt grants in the past year — 23 out of 60 grant recipients replied — confirmed continuing unhappiness among many Irish scientists with the way in which grants are allocated. They complain that the way the review system works is obscure, and that they are never told why their applications are accepted or rejected.

Martin Lyes of Forbairt says that a new mechanism is being set up to provide information to all applicants when the results of this year's awards are made

The report focuses primarily on applied research and efficient transfer of research results out of laboratories. It calls for the government to help promote a doubling by 1999 of the funding of industrial research, by providing generous tax incentives to encourage industry — both indigenous and multinational — to increase its research activities.

The STIAC report says that the government should maintain its current 13 per cent

year, should be increased to at least £3,000.

At the same time, the panel says that universities should be more active in developing their own research programmes and building strong links with industry. It suggests that this attitude be enshrined in a Research Charter which should also define clear policies for career structures for researchers working on short-term contracts for industry; at present these scientists tend to be overlooked for academic promotion.

The report calls for a more co-ordinated approach to state-funded research. Currently this is divided across ministries, although most is organized through the state agency Forbairt, part of the Ministry for Commerce, Science and Technology.

It also suggests establishing a cabinet-level committee, chaired by the prime minister, to establish national research priorities and control expenditure. This would be supported by a permanent interdepartmental committee of civil servants, representing all the ministries with research responsibilities.

A science, technology and innovation council, made up of scientific experts from academia and industry, would act as an independent advisor to both committees. Together the new bodies would create a national plan for science and technology, something that Ireland has always lacked.

The total package of recommendations made by the panel has a high price tag. In order to achieve all its recommendations, state support for science and technology would have to increase by £82 million — an increase of around 16 per cent over 1993.

STIAC suggests that its recommendations are phased in over the several years. But it asks for £25 million to be provided immediately to address the most urgent problems it identifies. Rabbitte says that it will be up to the Travers committee to consider much extra money should be made available this year. But he suggests his own ministry will be in a position to contribute.

Although Rabbitte says that he has not ruled out producing a white paper based on the report, he appears to prefer closing the debate and moving straight into implementation. But in the absence of a formal commitment, some scientists are concerned that good intentions may be insufficient to ensure that significant changes take place.

"STIAC has shown how to lead Ireland out of the international dunce's corner, but the new rhetoric must lead to significant action", says Mike Hopkins, chairman of the Irish Research Scientists' Association, aware that most of the recommendations of the last review of science in Ireland, conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1974, were never implemented.

Allison Abbott

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share of total financing for industrial research, and that an "Irish Interfirm Co-operation Programme" should be set up to help Ireland's many small companies by providing joint research and development facilities.

Despite the strong emphasis on applied research, the report also strongly condemns the notoriously low level of support for basic research, barely 10 per cent of the European Union average. It proposes that funds for basic research should be increased fourfold, to £6 million (US\$9.7 million) per year.

The report also says that the government should carry out a £25 million programme, over a five-year period, to modernize research equipment in universities. Health research funding should double its current budget of £2.5 million, it says, and scholarships for PhDs, now limited to £1,000 per

known in May. But he says that there are no plans at present to introduce significant changes to Forbairt's grant evaluation procedure.

This is despite IRSA's dissatisfaction with the operation of the subject-specific peer review panels, which assess applications without sending each one to outside referees. The association would like a formal peer review system to be introduced; but Lyes says that such systems have proved to be time-consuming and not very effective.

Nevertheless he says that Forbairt will reconsider IRSA's proposal later in the year. Meanwhile the review committees will be expanded and will include a number of foreign scientists.

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