

Mexico to overhaul R&D funding system

[MEXICO CITY] The administration of Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo is seeking a wide-ranging overhaul of the way public funding for research is allocated and administered.

A proposed law due to be considered by the Mexican Congress this spring is intended to promote and rationalize the support of scientific and technological research, in particular by setting up a unified, government-wide mechanism for planning and budgeting for research and development (R&D).

The consolidated R&D budget will comprise the planned expenditures in each of the relevant ministries. The aim is to allow the agencies that support R&D to interact, and to commit individual ministries to a specified level of support.

Pablo Rudomín, Zedillo's science adviser, says this will prevent funding for science from being edged out by ministries facing more pressing short-term funding demands. At present, there is nothing to prevent a ministry from re-allocating money originally designated for research and development.

The proposed legislation results from a joint initiative by the leaders of the president's council of science advisers, the Mexican Academy of Sciences, and CONACYT, the country's main research funding agency, at Zedillo's request.

According to Rudomín, Zedillo accepts that science needs more money, but thinks it must also "change structures, remove barriers and optimize the use of resources".

Although it is not mentioned in the proposed legislation, Zedillo plans to create and preside over a ministerial-level 'science and technology cabinet'. It is hoped that this cabinet and the consolidated programme will together allow national objectives for the public support of R&D to be defined, and ultimately lead to growth in the R&D budget.

Science and technology will be given a statutory voice in government through a 'permanent forum' of scientists, academics and industrialists, who will advise both the executive and legislative branches of government on policies for supporting R&D.

The new law will also change the way public research centres are administered. The laws controlling these centres were originally designed for state-owned industries, such as the oil company PEMEX, and are widely considered too restrictive for organizations carrying out scientific research.

The Centre for Research and Advanced Studies of the National Polytechnic Institute, for example, which is funded by the Ministry of Education, is audited several times a year, and its managers are not permitted to move money from one budget line to another, for example, to buy computers instead of chemicals.

The new law would grant these centres



Zedillo: plans to set up a 'science cabinet'.

administrative autonomy, equivalent to that of universities. It would also promote links between public research centres and private industry by removing the current cap on each centre's budget — thereby providing an incentive for the centres to raise funds from private sources.

In addition, the ministries operating such centres would be given increased flexibility in allocating their research funds. Unlike CONACYT, which gives research grants to scientists in any institution, the ministries have traditionally funded research only in their own centres. The new law would encourage them to invite and fund proposals from anywhere, including the universities.

The legislation is the most visible product so far of a collaboration agreement signed two-and-a-half years ago by the president's council of science advisers, the Mexican Academy of Sciences and CONACYT. Previous accomplishments of this alliance have included a presidential decree exempting research materials from import tax, and a national registry of scientists and engineers.

Members of the alliance consulted widely with leaders of the scientific community before drafting the legislation, to develop a consensus for the proposed changes. However, many Mexican scientists are unaware of

the law or uncertain of its detailed provisions. Oscar Prospéro-García, a neuroscientist at the National Autonomous University (UNAM), says that, in principle, it seems to be a good law, but "we don't yet know how it will work".

Other scientists would have liked a commitment in the law to a specified level of support for research and development. "What they should have done is commit to a percentage of gross domestic product [GDP]," says Mariano López de Haro, a physicist at UNAM's Energy Research Centre who is a member of the academy of sciences.

The government spends less than 0.3 per cent of Mexico's GDP on research and development. This figure has not changed during the Zedillo administration, despite early promises to increase it.

Rudomín says that consideration was given to including such a commitment, but the lawyers who drafted the legislation counselled against it on legal grounds. "We would all love — and we need — to see a substantial increase in support for research," he says. "But for this we need science to become part of our culture, so that people will recognize the importance of increased support."

The bill's proponents hope that Mexico's upper house (the Senate) will consider the legislation shortly after it re-convenes in March. Rudomín says he feels Congress will look favourably on the bill, at least in its broad outlines, and that it won't be treated as a partisan issue. "We have insisted that this goes above parties — it's something that the country needs."

Laura Garwin

Switzerland adopts transplant guidelines

[ZURICH] New guidelines on procedures for organ transplantation are being incorporated into the Swiss constitution following their approval in a national referendum on 7 February.

The guidelines will establish general principles for a planned federal law regulating transplant medicine. At present, some Swiss cantons have legislation on transplants, while others have none at all.

The move prohibits organ donation for money, and requires fair and equal access to donated organs, regardless of sex, race or wealth. But it fails to take a firm stance on xenotransplantation, the definition of death, or transplants of embryo cells and tissues.

Environmentalists, animal activists and opponents of genetic engineering had campaigned against the constitutional proposal, mainly because it does not include an outright ban on xenotransplants. That issue will be regulated by a new federal law on transplant medicine being developed by

the federal office of health. Thomas Zeltner, its director, says he does not expect the law to come into effect before 2002.

According to sources in Bern, a ban on xenotransplants is highly likely. The parliamentary health committee has voted in favour of a moratorium, and the government wants to outlaw the use of animal organs for transplants in general.

But clinical trials of xenotransplants offering potentially important therapeutic benefits could be allowed after special permission. Swisstransplant, a charity that currently regulates all transplant activities in Switzerland, welcomes the move as an urgent step towards clear and unified rules throughout the country.

But some experts warn that a ban on paid organ donation will not be helpful in resolving the chronic shortage of organs in Switzerland. Last year, 920 patients needing a transplant remained on waiting lists, while 28 died untreated.

Ulrich Bahnsen