

Europe seeks greater role for women on key advisory panels

[MUNICH] Research ministers of the European Union (EU) last week gave their backing to plans by the European Commission to promote women in science by increasing their role on advisory panels and in fellowship programmes.

German research minister Edelgard Bulmahn, whose ministry has adopted broad measures to promote women in science, initiated the move to endorse the plans (see *Nature* 399, 186; 1999).

The plan sets a target of 40 per cent participation of women on the advisory, evaluation and monitoring committees of the Commission's fifth Framework programme of research (FP5), launched earlier this year. They also aim for a similar level of female participation in the FP5's Marie Curie programme of fellowships for young researchers to work in another EU country, and include strategies for coordinating national efforts to promote the role of women in science.

The commission expects the fellowship target to be relatively easy to achieve, as women made up more than a third of the Marie Curie fellows funded in the fourth Framework programme (FP4), where no special measures for gender equality were taken. It is encouraging more applications from women through an information campaign to universities.

Meeting the target for committee membership could be more difficult. Less than ten per cent of the 2,000 or so evaluators for the FP4 were women, and the committees that will evaluate the first round of FP5 proposals must be drawn from a database of self-nominations from the research community. Yet less than 15 per cent of the entries on the database are women.

The commission is encouraging more women to nominate themselves for the database. It faced this problem last year in setting up the FP5's strategic external advisory groups. For these, women made up only nine per cent of names put forward by EU member states and 13 per cent of self-nominations. Despite this, it selected 27 per cent female membership, and 40 per cent of the groups are chaired by women.

Meeting in Berlin last week, the research ministers passed a resolution saying they recognized the under-representation of women in research and believed it should be tackled at regional, national and European levels. They also promised to ensure that statistics are gathered and made available, to "facilitate the development of appropriate policies at national and Community levels".

Alison Abbott

Australian geologists left reeling by budget cuts ...

[SYDNEY] The Australian Geological Survey Organisation (AGSO) is to lose one-fifth of its funding and staff numbers as a result of budget cuts announced after the 1999–2000 budget earlier this month.

Among those hit is the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, which shed A\$151 million to a total budget of A\$2,333 million (US\$1,547 million). An increase of seven per cent to support industrial innovation by industry has coincided with greater cuts in other programmes, including AGSO.

The organization experienced similar budget cuts three years ago, losing full-time access to a survey vessel but gaining a new building (see *Nature* 381, 547; 1996). Staff numbers had reduced to 490 this year and are now expected to fall to around 400.

According to an internal memorandum, AGSO is balancing its books by phasing out land surveys and some other scientific programmes, sacking all its palaeontologists and reducing staff in its minerals division by a quarter.

Senior research scientists will have to compete with administrators for a reduced number of executive posts. And closure of the stores in its new building means that AGSO will lack in-house equipment to support fieldwork: projects will have to buy or lease gear and transport from their own reduced funding.

One geologist says that AGSO had prided itself on becoming one of the first branches of the public service to introduce promotion based on merit rather than seniority. Now, he says, "nine of those promoted to principal research scientist out of 14 in the minerals division are being given no choice but to accept redundancy. Staff are devastated."

A government official admits that the cuts are "unfortunate", but says they are a direct result of the ending of two major projects, the National Geoscience Mapping Accord and the Law of the Sea Project. In future, AGSO's operations will "focus more on offshore petroleum work and Australia's marine jurisdiction work".

But Malcolm Walter of Macquarie University in Sydney describes the closure of land surveys as "a devastating blow". Bob Day, president of the Australian Geoscience Council and a former chief geologist in the state of Queensland, says: "The losses will only exacerbate the crisis for geoscience with up to half of Australia's 8,000 geoscientists now out of a job."

Peter Cullen, president of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, is calling for a strategic review of government investment in geoscience. "The government is letting the nation's skill base slip through our fingers at the first signs of a downturn," he says.

Peter Pockley

... while New Zealand research gets thin rations

[SYDNEY] With a general election looming, New Zealand's minority National Party government has increased science and technology spending by NZ\$14.8 million to NZ\$426.2 million (US\$226 million) in its budget for 1999–2000, keeping funding slightly ahead of inflation.

But this increase will make no impact on NZ's ranking near the bottom of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's league tables. A target set in 1996 for the research and development budget to grow annually, from 0.53 to 0.8 per cent of gross domestic product by 2010, appears to have been shelved.

A New Economy

Research Fund, worth NZ\$5.6 million, has been introduced to help generate new technologies, and some grant schemes have received small increases. But the university sector is upset that there was no restoration of a cut of NZ\$95 million made during last year's economic crisis.

Graeme Fogelberg, chair of the NZ Vice-Chancellors' Committee, said the cuts would: "rip the heart out of postgraduate education to fund undergraduate courses and a 'contestable research' fund," worth NZ\$20 million next year.

The budget was preceded by an announcement of the cabinet's blueprint for research and development.

These funding guidelines are based on 14 'target outcomes' developed as part of the Ministry for Research, Science and Technology's controversial Foresight project (see *Nature* 398, 250; 1999).

George Petersen, president of the Academy Council of the Royal Society of New Zealand, is relieved that the importance of basic research is specifically mentioned in the outcomes. But he is disappointed in the lack of answers to pressing questions about funding levels and distribution.

A move to run all government-funded research using the Foresight model is said to have been shunned during budget planning by other ministries.

P.P.