

Spanish council quizzed on recruits . . .

[BARCELONA] Spain's Higher Council of Scientific Research (CSIC), the country's main public source of science funding, has created 150 new positions for junior scientists this year, to be distributed between more than 100 institutes nationwide.

But the optimal allocation of these jobs is still a hot topic, particularly following the recent debate on personnel selection at universities, where nepotism is said to be rife (see *Nature* 396, 712; 1998).

In particular, there are frequent complaints about 'local lobbies' at CSIC institutes, which draw up job profiles that favour predetermined candidates (see box).

Both César Nombela, the CSIC's president, and Emilio Lora-Tamayo, vice-president of scientific and technological research at the CSIC, are enthusiastic about the substantial increase in new posts, promised by the government 18 months ago, to assist young researchers returning from abroad.

In 1998, 120 new positions for junior scientists were created, of which 65 were tenured staff positions and 55 non-permanent (interim). This year's employment offer, which

opened in March, will allow the incorporation of still more junior scientists, creating 60 tenured and 90 interim positions.

Mariano Esteban, head of the CSIC National Centre of Biotechnology in Madrid, is confident that the CSIC's appointment procedures will ensure that those appointed are of a high standard. He says that periodic evaluation of CSIC centres by committees of international experts should encourage competitiveness in research and make researchers more mobile.

Lora-Tamayo says the jobs requested by each institute do not determine the final allocation of positions. Potential positions are first analysed by 'coordinators' in eight scientific areas, and finally decided by an appointment board.

Although each institute is asked to prioritize its needs for new appointments, he points out that "this is only a consultative step", and that the CSIC Presidency aims "to make job descriptions as open as possible to offer the best possibilities to the better applicants".

The needs of each institute are then evaluated, taking into account its scientific output



Grand designs: CSIC's task is to distribute the new posts between 100 institutes nationwide.

and ability to raise external research funds, says Lora-Tamayo. The selection process, he says, is designed to ensure the recognition of equal opportunities and scientific merit.

Luis Sanz-Menéndez, of the CSIC Institute for Advanced Social Studies, says that, in contrast to university appointment panels, which can set their own evaluation criteria, "CSIC panels must follow general criteria laid down by the agency". He admits that problems occur at some institutes, but says that these may reflect organizational problems, for example the lack of a collective strategy.

Alfonso Vázquez-Vaamonde, professor of chemistry at the CSIC National Centre of Metallurgical Research and president of the CSIC's association of research personnel, acknowledges that favouritism can operate in the appointment process, mainly when there is a local candidate who may not have got a post previously.

Nombela accepts that the CSIC's appointments policies could be improved. But he says that "the analysis of the institutes' proposals is becoming increasingly rigorous", and points out that recent indicators published by the European Commission lists the CSIC as the only Spanish institution in the first 15 on the publications-impact index.

The issue has been highlighted by the difficulties encountered by many postdoctoral students returning from abroad at the government's invitation.

Fernando Valladares, an ecologist at the CSIC Centre of Environmental Sciences, says that, "although new posts have been created, general deficiencies continue". In particular, he calls for "new forms of recruitment to allow higher levels of dynamism".

Marta Alvarez Fernández, a chemist who last year won a permanent research position after applying for the CSIC public employment offer, is critical of what she describes as "improvisation in scientific policy".

Manuel Torres, a staff scientist at the CSIC Institute of Applied Physics, confirms the criticisms, although he argues that the problems appear to be worse at institutions doing applied research than at CSIC centres devoted to basic research.

Xavier Bosch

. . . as physicist's complaints hit their mark

[BARCELONA] A leading physics research institute in Spain has agreed to broaden its recruitment criteria for three new posts, following a protest by one of its professors that its criteria were too narrow, and had been written to favour particular candidates.

Javier Bermejo, a professor of physics at the Institute of Structure of Matter in Madrid, says that junior staff recruited to his institute last year – a high-energy theorist, a nuclear physicist and a vibrational spectroscopist – were appointed through open and fair competition.

But he complained that, this year, his institute's recruitment committee had again identified its top priorities as being specialists in the same three fields.

According to Bermejo, although institute officials claimed that "balanced development" was needed, the narrow designations reflected pressure to appoint unsuccessful applicants from

the previous year.

Francisco José Balta-Calleja, the institute's director, says there were inevitably internal conflicts because "each department may seek a post for its own candidate".

According to José Vicente García-Ramos, head of the department of vibrational spectroscopy and a member of this year's committee, one problem is that there are scientists with excellent research records in each department, either on short-term contracts or temporarily working abroad, who cannot be appointed because of insufficient posts.

Bermejo says that, in general, he applauds the CSIC's efforts to increase the number of scientific staff and diversify research in its centres (see main story). But he is concerned that local pressures contribute to "in-breeding" that may close doors to scientists trained in emerging research areas.

Such pressures, he adds, tend to come from researchers who are active in

fields that are already overstaffed, but who have the power to maintain a "self-replication" process.

"My own career path to the position of professor was made possible by open competition," says Bermejo. "Young researchers should have to apply for posts that are as general as possible, and not narrowly defined."

The CSIC says it has long been aware of this issue. After indicating that he intended to go public with his concerns, Bermejo says he was told by Emilio Lora-Tamayo, vice-president of scientific and technological research at the CSIC, that the priorities identified by his institute's committee were too narrow, and that the CSIC accepted that this year's posts at his institute should include broader profiles.

The list of profiles was announced last week, and the posts in question are broadly defined as theoretical and experimental physics – without additional designations.

X. B.