

Research heads seek European platform

[STRASBOURG] The science ministers of Austria and Germany are supporting a bid by the European Science Foundation (ESF) to become a formal adviser to the European Commission on research issues.

At the same time, however, tensions have arisen between the ESF and the heads of the national research councils of the European Union (EU) — who meet regularly as a group known as Eurohorcs — over the amount of direct influence that the research councils should, through Eurohorcs, have within the ESF.

ESF's main activities include supporting European research networks and conferences and coordinating reports on issues such as the future needs of European researchers for synchrotron radiation or neutron sources (see *Nature* 396, 4; 1998).

Under pressure from its 62 member organizations, from 21 European states, to expand its remit to include activities not undertaken in the European Commission's framework research programmes, the ESF has in recent years developed interests in research policy.

Two years ago, for example, it presented a detailed report to the commission on a proposed scientific agenda for Europe, prepared for the debate on the content of the fifth Framework research programme (*Nature* 382, 8; 1996).

Casper Einem, the Austrian research minister, told the ESF annual assembly in Strasbourg last week that its unique constitution as a federation of academies of sciences and research councils made the foundation a suitable body to “take up European tasks such as evaluating European [research] programmes and being consulted on all science policy questions”.

Reinhard Grunwald, secretary-general of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the German university grant-giving body, told the assembly that the new German minister of research, Edelgard Bulmahn, also believed that the ESF should have a formal advisory role to the EU.

Grunwald said that this might be done through the European Research Forum, the commission's new top-level research advisory committee (see *Nature* 393, 502; 1998).



Brooks: wants role in Strasbourg body.

Bulmahn will put this on the agenda of the regular EU research ministers' meeting when Germany takes on the EU presidency in January.

Meanwhile, however, questions are being raised about the extent to which the foundation can simultaneously serve the interests of its “intellectual stakeholders”—the grassroots scientific community — and its “financial stakeholders”, namely its member organizations, including in particular those belonging to Eurohorcs.

In contrast to the ESF, Eurohorcs has no secretariat or executive. Indeed, it takes pride in the informality of its loose organization. The group meets twice a year, primarily to discuss shared problems.

Despite the lack of a formal structure, Eurohorcs is keen to have a stronger voice in European-level science policy decisions. Aware that its councils provide most of the ESF's funding, it has been pressing the ESF to act in a more defined way as the executive — and voice — of Eurohorcs.

At last week's assembly meeting, for example, Richard Brook, head of the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, and chair of Eurohorcs, called for a clear relationship with Eurohorcs to be written into the ESF statutes. “We need defined links that everyone can understand,” he said.

But ESF general secretary Enric Banda points out that such a formal relationship can only be incorporated into the foundation's statutes if Eurohorcs were to become a legal entity.

Not all Eurohorcs members want this. “We should remain an informal organization,” Grunwald told the assembly. Unlike Brook, Grunwald wants the relationship between the ESF and Eurohorcs to “be maintained more through mutual trust than institutional links”.

Banda is frustrated by what he sees as a lack of clarity in the demands of some Eurohorcs members and their vague but frequently articulated mistrust of the ESF.

Banda says he would welcome closer cooperation with Eurohorcs, “But the ball is their court”. He points out that Eurohorcs “has it in its power to take over the ESF by dominating the executive council, which is made up of representatives of member organizations”.

Alison Abbott

Australia's basic research faces shake-up

[SYDNEY] A plan for the radical transformation of the funding of basic research in Australia has raised a storm of protest after extracts from a confidential government document were leaked to the press.

Complaints focus on the proposed ending of the Australian Research Council's competitive, peer-reviewed funding system. Instead, research in science and the humanities would be supported by block grants to institutions.

After a formula for dividing up funds between institutions has been settled — by performance criteria which many fear will favour the larger, older universities — the ARC (current budget A\$445 million; US\$280 million) would see its influential role contract to a purely advisory one.

Researchers are angry that draft details have not been circulated publicly for comment, claiming that the education department has been feeding stories to the media to gauge the strength of feeling.

The government has given no indication of the reasoning behind these changes. Its apparent unwillingness to discuss the proposals openly is mirrored by the silence of Vicki Sara, chair of the ARC, who had been expected to release recommendations of an external review and a strategic plan for the ARC in the near future (see *Nature* 389, 220; 1997).

Sara had argued that the council's status

should change from that of a branch within the education department to a statutory authority, but such enhanced independence is opposed by the conservative government that was re-elected in October.

According to leaked reports, the Australian National University — currently treated separately from other universities — may be absorbed into a single national scheme. If so, its Institute of Advanced Studies would lose its unique ability to mount long-term programmes with block funding — IAS staff are ineligible for ARC grants (see *Nature* 382, 484; 1996).

Science and university leaders are lobbying the education minister, David Kemp. The sharpest reaction has come from the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, whose president, Peter Cullen, wrote to Kemp last week expressing “deep concern”.

Cullen urged Kemp to maintain government support for basic research by keeping the current scheme. He says that the federation, which represents over 40 specialist universities, “doubts that an internal university reviewing process can meet the [international] standard developed by the ARC” and believes funds “should be focussed only on the most excellent of proposals”. He urges Kemp to “put an end to these damaging and ill-considered ideas”.

Peter Pockley