

correspondence

Spanish science: underfinanced and over centralised

SIR, — The uncertainty which research is suffering in Spain was briefly reviewed in a recent issue of *Nature* (9 August, p438). In the meantime we are approaching collapse.

In the last decade most research groups were supported by three- or four-year grants administered by the Comisión Asesora de Investigación Científica y Técnica. These grants are essential to cover running expenses as well as contracts for young scientists waiting for a stable position. The last distribution of grants took place in 1977 and all grants presently in existence terminate in December 1979. No new distribution scheme has been publicised, so that up to this moment we do not know the 1980 situation.

Even if a distribution of grants is announced in the next few weeks, processing them will take several months. Under these circumstances many scientists are forced to leave the country. Only emergency action will stop irreversible damage to research in Spain: namely, to extend automatically current grants for one year more.

The Ministry of Universities and Research is certainly preparing a three year plan (1980-1982) for the development of research in Spain. We are all eagerly waiting for its guidelines, but time is running short.

Another stumbling block in the development of research in Spain is its continuing centralism. A clear example is the Spanish Research Council (CSIC). Over two thirds of its activities and scientists are located in Madrid, with even a larger fraction of its budget concentrated in Madrid. This fact prevents a rational development of research elsewhere in Spain, close to places (industry, agriculture) where it is most needed.

In 1977, 187 new positions for scientists were provided; 70.6% of them were awarded to Institutes in Madrid. Presently another 198 new permanent positions are in the process of being provided; again over 60% of them will be for Institutes in Madrid. These numbers are not trivial, since the new positions mentioned represent 28% of the total permanent positions of the Spanish Research Council.

A peculiar geography of science has arisen through the years: there is not a single research institute in the Basque country, there are more Catalan biochemists working for the CSIC in Madrid than in Barcelona, there are more Catalan physicists working for the French CNRS than for the Spanish CSIC . . . This trend needs urgent modification. Drastic preference for new positions should be given to new and existing groups located in other areas of Spain.

At present a lack of funds and guidelines, together with the maintenance of centralism are producing irreparable damage to the development of research in Spain. We very much hope that the announced three year plan may open a brighter future.

Yours faithfully,

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Egyptian science

SIR, — I must comment on the article by Ziauddin Sardar (2 August, page 350).

"Divided and uncertain" does not reflect the reality of the Egyptian scientific community. As a scientist, and science editor for *Al Ahram* for the last twenty years, I will try to be objective, realistic and frank. The Egyptian scientific community, the biggest in the Arab world and Africa by any measure, is not divided regarding scientific cooperation with Israel. Instead the majority are for international scientific cooperation which they are practising all over the world in spite of shortcomings, drawbacks and loopholes in Egypt; and regardless of the sufferings of scientists and lack of stability and funds due to continuous wars which have drained and exhausted our already depleted resources. Cooperation with Israel, on what basis?

In the meantime the powerful Israeli scientific community is silent and negative regarding the dangers threatening the peace process, mainly the insistence of the Israeli politicians and policy makers on depriving the Palestinians — including the scientific community — from their legitimate human rights to live in peace in their homeland. The Israeli scientific community is meanwhile raising hell against the Soviets for injustice against some individual Jewish scientists.

To be frank, the Egyptian scientific community does not like or agree with the Israeli superiority complex, the assumption that Israel is the only cradle of science and technology in the Middle East, and that it is an oasis of development and civilisation in a desert of backwardness inhabited by ignorant Arabs, including the Egyptians. Not bearing in mind the colossal funds and privileges Israel is getting from the US and other rich Jewish communities, the Israeli scientific community must realise and recognise that Egyptian scientists — inside Egypt and the brain-drained Egyptian scholars in the US, Europe and other Arab countries — are competent despite all the shortcomings. Unless confidence prevails, signed treaties will not help either Israeli or Egyptian scientific communities. We in Egypt refuse the Israeli arrogance in science and technology, including the assumption that Israel will teach the Egyptians and lead them to prosperity. Egyptians are certain (and not uncertain as Mr Sardar says) that comprehensive and just peace must include the Palestinians who have one of the highest rates of education of scientific personnel in the area, and we need their cooperation too, to build peace.

The Egyptian scientific community is certain and undivided about one thing: Egypt will still be part of the Arab world and cannot substitute Israel for Arabs, not only for religious, moral, ethical and historical reasons, but for practical, economic and psychological reasons too. The Arab world is the area where the Egyptian scientific community is practising and will continue to practise its human superiority, and make money too. This cannot be fulfilled in the cooperation with Israel.

Regarding Nechemia Meyer's article "Israel: a one sided love affair", I quite agree with the title but not with the content. The negative response to the willingness of the Israeli scientific community to enter into bilateral relations with Egyptian institutions and the story of the experience of the Israeli scientists in Egypt is very normal. As long as

the Israeli politicians and policy makers still insist on flagrantly depriving the Palestinians of their right to live peacefully in their homeland, and the negative attitude of the powerful Israeli scientific community continues, the chance of Egyptian-Israeli scientific cooperation will be very marginal and meagre. Cooperation cannot be enforced by treaties, especially between scientists. Cooperation can start only when confidence is prevailing — and this is not the case yet. The Egyptian scientific community is part of Egypt, with all its aspirations for a just and comprehensive peace for Egyptians, Israelis and Palestinians.

Yours faithfully,

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Highlighting persecution

SIR, — Dr Lorch (13 September, page 98) is right to emphasise the large themes of international solidarity. Vera Rich has from time to time highlighted smaller, but not unimportant, instances of persecution of individual scientists. Her facts are sometimes incomplete, but aren't they hard to come by? If Dr Lorch finds it easy, perhaps he would find out why the Fields Medallist Gregory Margoulis was not permitted to attend the Helsinki Congress of Mathematicians. Some of your readers would like to know.

As to the USSR relying on its own scientists, Dr Lorch will find an interesting example of masochistic circumcision if he looks at the USSR reproduction of *J. Chem. Soc. Faraday Transactions II* (69) 1973 page 1104; it deals with the . . . Dognadze theory. The missing name is Levich.

Yours faithfully,

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Decentralising science

SIR, — This area is exactly such as you have in mind in your editorial 'Another sort of brain drain' (13 September). Apart from the excellent Agricultural Department at Aberystwyth 60 miles away, scientific and technological activity here is confined to teaching and the handful of people required to run the three oil refineries and the power station in Milford Haven.

Yet these massive capital intensive plants frequently find their way into lightly populated rural areas of the country, and could serve as a focus for a far more developed scientific community — enjoying incidentally lower establishment cost and infinitely preferable environmental regimes. It may not be fashionable or desirable to adopt the scientific cities of Soviet Siberia: but everyone would benefit from a sensible decentralisation of scientific work — not least from the elimination of time loss and stress inherent in daily travel to virtually any location in South East England.

Yours faithfully,

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