

# Hungary pushes for further reform

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**Hungarian science has undergone considerable post-communist reform, but the country's academy of sciences feels that further change is needed to allow it to take tough decisions on spending priorities.**

[BUDAPEST] The Hungarian Academy of Sciences has asked the government to modify four-year-old legislation liberalizing its operating procedures to introduce more hierarchical forms of decision-making.

At the same time, OTKA, Hungary's main grant-giving body for basic research, plans to introduce more stringent selection procedures, a move that will result in more grant applications being rejected.

Both moves reflect attempts by Hungarian academics to fine-tune hastily introduced post-communist academic reforms because some aspects have proved 'too democratic' to allow for tough but necessary decisions on research priorities and spending.

Although most academics favour a tightening up of the reforms, some fear that reconcentration of power and resources could be bad for Hungary's cash-starved research environment by removing funding from those whose research is not considered an immediate priority.

The 1994 act governing the regulations of the academy, which, like the previous 'Soviet' model, runs a series of basic research institutes and acts as a learned society, was a compromise between two camps.

One opinion, supported by academics jealous of the privileges enjoyed by the academy in communist times, wanted to end its function as a learned society. The other camp, supported mostly by academy staff, opposed such a dramatic change in the 170-year-old institution.

The reformed academy remains a learned society but has broadened its membership to include all holders of PhDs, first introduced in Hungary in 1993 (*Nature* 367, 588; 1994), so university researchers are now included.

A 675-strong decision-making general assembly seems to be working well. But there have been problems with a second body, the Council of the Academic Research Institutes (AKT), which oversees the running of the academy's institutes and the distribution of its HUF5-billion (US\$23 million) budget. Priority-setting has been hampered by conflicts of interest because the AKT includes representatives from all the institutes.

Last year, for example, to reach agreement on tough moves to reform the academy (see *Nature* 386, 426; 1997), the general assembly had to bypass the AKT and create a

## Budget rise promise

The painful post-communist contraction of Hungarian science has now stopped. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences was given small budget increases in 1997 and 1998, partly in acknowledgement of reform that has halved its scientific staff since 1990.

Rapid expansion has been promised by the new centre-right coalition government, which took office last month. The largest party, the Young Democrats, promised to double total research spending "in the mid-term", starting by raising it from just under 0.7 per cent to 1.0 per cent of gross national product within the next year.

But many regard these plans, which also include promises to abandon newly introduced student fees, as little more than good intentions with little basis in experience.

Like many in the new government, both the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and the education minister, Zoltán Pokorni, are in their mid-thirties and have never served in political office before. **A.A.**

'consolidation' committee consisting of top academy officials and the heads of its three main scientific committees.

Eventually, around 100 of the academy's scientific posts, and many more administrative and support posts, were abolished, and many institutes were forced to merge.

The parliamentary proposal, drawn up by the academy's presidium and approved by its general assembly after a hard fight, would

replace the AKT with a committee of similar composition to the consolidation committee. It would also increase the power of the academy's elected president.

A newly organized group called the Forum of Scientists, consisting of elected representatives from academy institutes and research groups, last month presented the academy with a counterproposal, retaining the AKT and giving the forum a formal voice in decision-making.

"We decided eight years ago that the academy should have a democratic form of leadership," says Gyögy Kéri, a forum member who is director of an academy biology research group based at the Semmelweis University in Budapest. Kéri argues that researchers should take part in decision-making. But the academy's deputy secretary-general, Gábor Náray-Szabó, says the academy is sticking to its original proposal.

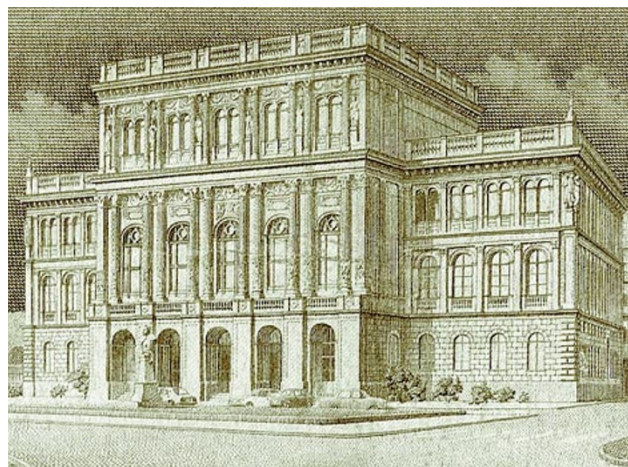
Like the academy, OTKA faces tough decisions about how to distribute its budget. This has halved in value since 1992, and now has to cover both university and academy scientists.

OTKA has set up a solid peer-review process, and has recently established initiatives giving more fundamental support to Hungary's research system. These include a grants programme designed to bring post-docs home from abroad, and a special fund for equipment and journals.

András Lipták, OTKA's president and a professor of biochemistry at the University of Debrecen, says OTKA plans to reduce the number of grants it awards and increase their value; at present, the highest grant is HUF1.5 million and the minimum — which most receive — is HUF500,000.

Lipták says the best researchers must be given enough money to work competitively. But he acknowledges that "some OTKA committees are unhappy about this".

Attila Meskó, a professor of geophysics at the Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest and an OTKA officer, feels that OTKA should distribute small grants more widely to give "moral support to Hungary's many struggling researchers". □



**Building for the future: the Hungarian Academy of Sciences wants to change legislation to streamline the decision-making hierarchy that divides up its research budget.**