Delays, confusion over rules hinder EC research projects

Munich. Bureaucratic obstacles are slowing progress in three research programmes sponsored by the European Commission (EC), frustrating applicants faced with unclear instructions and changing rules and angering those who succeed by making them wait for their money.

Most of the 15 programmes being funded under the commission's current research plan, which allocates ECU5.7 billion (US\$6.8 billion) over five years, are running smoothly. The plan, known as Framework 3, is intended to encourage cooperative efforts by requiring proposals from laboratories in more than one country. But there are problems with three programmes: the ECU131-million Biomed programme, which supports biomedical and health research; the ECU1.3-billion ESPRIT programme, which supports information technology; and the ECU488-million Human Mobility programme, which offers researchers the chance to move around Europe to gain expertise in techniques not available in their own regions.

The Biomed programme has been frustrated by feuds between the commission and its advisory committee over how applica-

tions will be peer-reviewed. The normal procedure is a two-tier process, with an initial screening to weed out the best applications followed by a more comprehensive review to decide funding.

In the case of Biomed, some 1,900 proposals are competing for only 100 grants. The programme's advisory committee, mostly heads of research councils or departments of health from each of the 18 participating countries, decided to invite 300 to submit full applications. But Filippo Pandolfi, the EC commissioner for research, changed the rules.

Bowing to pressure from groups that felt they had not been properly represented, Pandolfi asked the commission to give assessment scores to all applicants and invite them to proceed to the next step. This angered the committee, which unanimously refuses to back down from its earlier decision. It argues that a full review of low-priority proposals would waste the time of both scientists and reviewers.

More than 700 full applications have been received, but none has yet been put out for peer review. The reviewers were chosen for discipline-orientated assessment groups

last November, but they have not yet been called.

By contrast, proposed research under the ESPRIT programme has been peer-reviewed, but few of the successful applicants have received their money. The delay stems mostly from the commission's decision to go by the book after an unrelated decision that had not been ratified by all the commissioners was successfully challenged in January.

The administrators of ESPRIT, which received more than a thousand applications by its closing date last October, are now making sure that each grant decision is approved by each commissioner. So far, of the 300 successful applicants, 65 have had their grants fully approved and 140 more are expected to go out shortly. Two more batches will be completed by the end of the year. Officials at the commission say that they have also been slowed by the unexpectedly large number of applicants and the legal changes needed to administer research and development funding according to new rules written into the Maastricht Treaty, which prepares member countries for European unity.

The Human Mobility programme is intended as a way to distribute expertise throughout Europe; in practice, this means scientists from the poorer countries of southern Europe moving north. The start of the programme was delayed for several months, and when it was finally launched early last month applicants were given a deadline of only two to three weeks. In addition, the

China relaxes rules for visiting citizens

Beijing. China has adopted new rules that will make it much easier for Chinese nationals living and working in other countries to return for a visit. The changes all but abolish a system introduced shortly after the massacre at Tiananmen Square in June 1989 that severely restricted Chinese visitors wishing to return to positions outside China.

The decree, which took effect on 1 July, stipulates that anyone with a valid passport and an entrance visa to another country will be allowed to leave China freely. Mao Feng-Ping, director of the exit and entrance administration bureau in the Ministry of Public Security, says that the new rules apply "no matter how much time passes between the trip to China and the flight home and even if the country is different from where the visitor began his journey". The visitor need not obtain a visa inside China, nor need the passport be issued by mainland authorities. Under the former system, which required an 'exit registration card', such travel was nearly impossible.

Chinese scientists have long advocated the dropping of such restrictions because of the harm done to the country's research institutions. Talented young scientists who do not think they will be allowed to leave

China will choose to stay abroad. Similarly, the policy limits attendance at scientific conferences. For example, officials from the American Physical Society are concerned about attendance at an international conference on semiconductors in Beijing because of a lack of assurances from their hosts that all participants would be allowed to leave the country at the end of the conference, due to begin on 10 August.

The new rules will make life easier for Chinese researchers and students living outside China. The possibility of being retained during a visit to see family or attend a conference has exacted a high price from researchers who choose to live and work in another country. It was also a deterrent for Western scientists thinking about hiring Chinese nationals.

"When I heard that he wanted to go back to China for a visit before starting work here, I thought that I might never see him again", says Ellen Williams, a physicist at the University of Maryland, about Yunong Yang, a postdoctoral researcher who joined her laboratory a few months ago. "None of my Chinese students has ever had a problem, but you always worry."

In fact, Yang was forced to cancel his

travel plans after US officials told him that they needed six months to renew his passport. "They told me that they have to write to China and make sure everything is in order", he says, "and that sometimes they wait a long time before they get any answer. I couldn't wait that long." But Yang sent his wife and children, and they returned last month without incident.

Researchers within China are also happy with their newly granted freedom. For Li Ru-Jing, who completed his graduate training in Britain before returning to Beijing, the new rules may end an 18-month hiatus in his scientific career. "Now the ball is in my court", he says. "The test is whether I can find a foreign institute who wishes to take me in."

The change is part of China's campaign to open itself to the outside. The theme was sounded by party leader Deng Xiao-Ping during a tour of South China earlier this year and echoed by deputies at the National People's Congress in April. It may also reflect the country's need for hard currency from the West, along with a realization that excluding some of its most productive citizens is a poor way to stimulate economic growth.

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