EU ministers temper Framework reforms

Quirin Schiermeier, Munich

Radical plans for the European Commission's next Framework programme for scientific research have been watered down by European Union research ministers. The plans would have shifted money into continent-wide research networks and ended the funding of many small projects.

The commission's sixth Framework programme will distribute 17.5 billion euros (US\$15.8 billion) starting in 2003. Officials said in February that they hoped to use the funds to integrate European research activities by establishing networks in key scientific areas, such as functional genomics and nanotechnology. Average grant sizes were to increase by an order of magnitude, and support for smaller, unrelated projects would have ceased (see *Nature* 410, 4; 2001).

The plans were criticized in November by the European Parliament, which proposed over 300 changes, including a shift in emphasis away from new fields such as genomics and towards diseases such as malaria and AIDS.

Meeting in Brussels on 10 December, research ministers from member states agreed to a compromise version of Framework 6 in which the large networks will receive slightly less funding than originally intended so that some smaller projects can

still be funded. Ministers also agreed that the new networks will be evaluated independently after two years.

The parliament had also wanted to curtail plans to support big computing projects such as the Grid — specialized software and high-speed network hardware that will link individual computers to create huge amounts of computing power (see *Nature* 414, 475; 2001). CERN, the European laboratory for particle physics near Geneva, is one of several European organizations relying on the Grid to help them

analyse data from future projects.

Now, 300 million euros have been allocated to the Grid and related projects, close to the 350 million euros earmarked in the original budget. David Williams, coordinator of EU relations at CERN, says he is not complaining. "This is a perfectly sensible number which will help us get Grid networks and other e-science projects started."

The plans were also welcomed by representatives of central and south-eastern European countries, who hope to join the EU in the next few years, and fear that a big shift towards large projects would favour countries that already have a strong science base. "This is good news," says Andrzej Siemaszko, who runs a government office based in Warsaw that helps scientists write EU project proposals.

The new budget also features two new funding streams. In the first, 330 million euros will help to coordinate national research activities and policies — a cornerstone of the proposed common European research area. And 570 million euros are set aside for unforeseen developments that emerge during the Framework's lifetime, countering complaints about the inflexibility of the funding. ■

Planned merger worries Japan's nuclear researchers

David Cyranoski, Tokyo

Several hundred Japanese physicists and engineers face an uncertain future after the government announced plans to merge two nuclear research institutes by 2006. The move follows a decision earlier this year to cut the budgets of both institutes.

Details of the plan to unite the Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute (JAERI), based in Tokyo, and the Japan Nuclear Cycle Development Institute (JNC), located in Tokai northeast of the capital, were expected to be revealed on 18 December. Research at the JNC focuses on fast-breeder reactors and recycling of spent nuclear fuel. JAERI carries out a wide range of research, some of it related to atomic energy.

The proposal comes amid attempts by the government to streamline Japan's research institutes and to make research more economically focused. Plans to merge three major space laboratories were announced in August (see *Nature* 412, 843; 2001).

The latest plan was given added impetus by the fact that both institutes are state-funded businesses known as 'special public corporations'. Many of these corporations have been criticized for their inefficiency, and

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has vowed to change the status of them all by 2006. Government officials said earlier this year that budgets for JAERI and the JNC, like those of many other special public corporations, will be cut by 10% next year.

The Japanese science and education ministry, which helps to run both organizations, says that JAERI and the JNC have much in common, and that both institutes will benefit from a merger. Staff at the institutes disagree. "JAERI and JNC do completely different research and operate on a different scale," says Kazuo Mukai, director of planning at a JNC centre in Tsuruga, on the country's west coast. Shinzo Saito, vice-president of JAERI, adds that research at his institute could suffer from competition with JNC's costlier projects.

Both organizations are likely to be hit before the merger by the reduction in their budgets. Saito says that the cuts could affect JAERI's plans for a five-year project, worth ¥15 billion (US\$120 million), to build a prototype high-temperature, gas-cooled reactor. The reactor is designed to be more efficient than conventional reactors, and to produce hydrogen as well as electricity.

JAERI's construction of a linear accelerator and synchrotron at its Tokai campus could also be delayed. The facilities are due to be used in studies ranging from protein structure to superconductivity, and will form a booster for a larger synchrotron, which is scheduled to open in 2006.

Mukai says that it is too early to say how the cuts will affect the JNC, but predicts that many projects will be delayed by a year or more. ■

Man with a plan: Junichiro Koizumi wants to make state-backed enterprises more efficient.

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