

These committees are not obliged to operate a formal peer review system (though some do) or to follow defined rules for evaluation. Their activities are widely criticized as lacking transparency, although many defend them on the grounds that they are democratically elected by the entire academic community.

The heads of the committees form the decision-making Consiglio di presidenza (presidential council) which has considerable influence over the scientific direction of the CNR by choosing the targeted projects and controlling staff appointments. As a result, the CNR president has relatively little personal power.

There have been previous attempts to remove university research funds from the CNR and give them directly to the universities, in a bid to solve the problem of poor distribution. With the removal of its strategic funds, the CNR would lose its role as a funding agency, and be left as merely an organization running research institutes. Tognon argues that the CNR's strength "would remain research". But Lucio Bianco, the agency's new president, says that "it is not correct for CNR just to run institutes". While

acknowledging that CNR needs reform, he thinks this should be an internal matter. "The CNR is the scientific focus of Italy, and it should not be stripped of its powers and responsibilities," he says.

Bianco wants the councils suggested by the ministry to be housed within the CNR, so that they will remain politically independent, and so that the CNR will maintain its "focus" role. He wants the agency role of the CNR to be maintained. But he also wants a clear separation between advisory committees and management functions, and wants to install an appropriate system of peer review.

Bianco insists that the CNR should retain its role as distributor of small grants to universities, but that these should no longer be spread thinly among all applicants. Tognon opposes these grants as "small dowries to each professor", but Bianco argues that they allow the CNR to "scout for new ideas" which would otherwise not find funding.

Bianco and Tognon at least agree on the fact that the CNR's many small research groups and institutes should be rationalized into bigger units. Bianco also wants to establish a new CNR governing body, whose mem-

bers, he suggests, could be in part nominated by the research minister, and in part elected by the academic community. It is important that the CNR president has the casting vote in this body, he says.

Other research organizations have less to fear from the Bassanini reforms. ENEA, for example, is hoping that regulatory reforms will give it more flexibility. When nuclear research ended in Italy after the Chernobyl disaster, ENEA turned its hand to many new research directions — "a thousand flowers bloomed", says its president, Nicola Cabibbo — which it would now like to rationalize.

The CNR still has time to lobby in its defence. Although the decrees which finally emerge from the working document published last week will not require a parliamentary vote, parliament must give an opinion on the directions indicated in the document. Parliamentary discussion will take place in the autumn, and the government is likely to take any strongly supported objection seriously. Discussions may be prolonged and heated, which could threaten the whole point of the exercise — the issuing of decrees within the set time frame.

Alison Abbott

Universities rally against cuts in Pentagon-funded research

[WASHINGTON] A congressional committee has created alarm among many leading US research universities by calling for a major redirection of Pentagon money away from basic research, and for this money to be used to restore the sagging budget for developing and deploying new weapons systems.

The national security appropriations subcommittee in the House of Representatives has cut the Clinton administration's budget request for basic research at the Department of Defense (DoD) from \$1.16 to \$1.03 billion. The subcommittee argues that the military services need the money for weapons modernization.

The bill would transfer most of the money from the basic research budget, which is largely spent in the universities, to exploratory development, which is done in the DoD and industrial laboratories.

News of the proposed cut alarmed universities, which are more heavily dependent on DoD funds than is sometimes realized. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, gets about \$60 million a year from DoD — one-fifth of all of its research funds, or about the same as it gets from the National Institutes of Health. Predictably it is the engineering and computer science departments that rely most heavily on DoD money.

University representatives meeting in Washington last week agreed to fight the House plan during the congressional recess, in the hope that it will be rejected when conferees from the House and the Senate

finalize a budget bill in September.

George Leventhal, an official at the Association of American Universities (AAU), which represents the 50 leading research universities, says that they hope to get support from defence contractors for the basic research programme.

University representatives deny that the DoD basic research account has received what the subcommittee describes as "never-ending budget growth", pointing out that it has fallen steadily from \$1.4 billion in 1993 to \$1.1 billion this year.

Taking a longer perspective, however, the Pentagon has held its spending power in

basic research at a level of around \$1.1 billion since 1990, during which time its much larger expenditure on research, development, test and evaluation (RDT&E) has slipped in value by one-quarter.

During that period, the Pentagon's procurement of new equipment has nose-dived, alarming defence hawks in the Congress. In the 1980s, procurement usually exceeded RDT&E by a factor of three to one. This year, the two items are close to parity — \$36 billion for RDT&E and \$44 billion for procurement of equipment (see diagram).

The Clinton administration had supported a substantial increase in basic research spending this year, arguing that long-term research is a cost-effective way of ensuring the nation's military strength. The Senate appears to accept this, but the House may not.

In a barbed comment aimed at research spending, the language in the House bill complains of cuts in "defense medical programmes, training and readiness accounts, and other programmes such as munitions which have direct and immediate relevance to war-fighting needs".

Universities will try to meet members of Congress, including Bill Young (Republican, Florida), chair of the House appropriations subcommittee, during the recess. They will argue that substantial issues are at stake not just for the universities but for national security, and that the amount of money saved is small compared with procurement and other defence needs.

Colin Macilwain

