

Dropping *habilitation* would aid progress in Poland

Standards are high in many disciplines, but changes are still needed in career structure.

Sir — I enjoyed your Editorial “Eastern promise” (*Nature* 426, 369; 2003), but I disagree with Cezary Wójcik’s response, “Eastern Europe; progress stifled by the old guard” (*Nature* 427, 196; 2004). If the system in Poland is — as described by the author — “hierarchical, immobile, hermetic and gerontocratic”, how has it managed to educate postdocs and students who are successful in the best laboratories in the world? The answer is simple: the picture is not as homogeneous as Wójcik suggests. At almost every university or institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences there are scientists who have chosen to remain in Poland, even though they could find positions in the United States or Western Europe.

Disciplines do vary, but in physics, mathematics, biology and chemistry at least, the standards are much higher than Wójcik describes. I am a professor of molecular biology and I probably belong to the “scientific establishment” Wójcik derides. Only three of some 80 publications that I have authored appeared in Polish journals, and I became a professor in Poland after my Polish team published a

paper in *Cell* and several others in *EMBO Journal* and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

I also disagree with the view that “[m]ost research money is distributed by arbitrary administrative decisions, not as peer-reviewed grants”. More than 10 years ago the State Committee for Scientific Research, composed entirely of elected members, introduced a grant system, based on a peer-review procedure that mirrors the US National Science Foundation. All grant applications in the life sciences have to be submitted in English and we ask reviewers from abroad to rank them.

Four years ago we introduced a new system for distributing science funding based only on the quality of the scientific work performed in Polish institutions (see www.kbn.gov.pl). We initiated special programmes on genomics, proteomics, bioinformatics and biodiversity, and we ask scientists from Germany, France, Sweden and the United Kingdom to validate them.

We are collaborating closely with the European Molecular Biology Organization and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute for additional support of young Polish

investigators, who are selected by these distinguished organizations. We are opening new Max Planck–Polish Academy of Sciences laboratories for young scientists working in molecular biology. Similarly, young scientists working at the International Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Warsaw are recruited according to international standards (*Nature* 421, 471–472; 2003). Independent positions are awarded on scientific criteria alone, and neither a *habilitation* nor the title of professor is required.

Certainly, change is happening too slowly, especially for young people. Therefore, I am convinced that upon entering the European Union, we have to forget about *habilitations* and introduce international competition for all independent positions, from assistant to full professor.

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Polish journals have an international impact

Sir — Cezary Wójcik, in Correspondence (“Eastern Europe; progress stifled the old guard” *Nature* 427, 196; 2004), expresses a view of Polish science that is true only to some extent. As young Polish scientists, working both in Poland and abroad, we wish to offer a counter-balancing viewpoint.

First, we do not deny that in some cases a scientific career may be based on “personal or political connections”. But to suggest this applies to the whole of Polish science, as Wójcik does, is an exaggerated generalization. The *habilitation* is not a mysterious qualification unrelated to any real scientific achievements, but an academic grade having its equivalents in other Western European countries — although in Germany it is no longer required to become a full professor.

Second, the medical sciences require particularly expensive materials and methods, and should not be considered as representative of all scientific disciplines, but rather as an exception.

Similarly, Polish medical journals may not always be internationally recognized, but other disciplines fare better. For example, *Acta Palaeontologica Polonica* has

an impact factor between 0.67 and 1.0 (data for 2001–02), which places it between tenth and fifteenth in the world rankings of the 29 indexed scientific journals in this field, and *Acta Astronomica* (impact factor 3.2 in 2002) ranks ninth in astronomy.

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Learning humility from a Nobel prizewinner

Sir — The Dutch biologist Niko Tinbergen — whose biography, *Niko’s Nature* by Hans Kruuk, is reviewed by John Krebs (*Nature* 427, 293–294; 2004) — may help us to understand one of the problems with German science outlined in the Editorial in the same issue (*Nature* 427, 271; 2004).

Tinbergen had an extraordinary characteristic that accounts, I believe,

for his ability to develop intellectually throughout his life, and stimulate his students and colleagues to do so too. It was his humility. At the weekly seminars that he held in his home for his fellow ethologists and others, I observed that he never hesitated to display his initial incomprehension of a new idea; he was determined to understand. It was an object lesson to his group.

This characteristic was unfortunately not shared by many of his peers. At the European conferences that he organized with his fellow Nobel prizewinners, it was striking how many German professors used their authority to determine what their juniors contributed. This must have been stultifying for both.

Although scientific hierarchies have become less rigid in Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder would do well to encourage more egalitarian intellectual innovation as he develops his plans for several new ‘elite’ German universities.

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