

# THIS WEEK

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## A global vision

*The International Council for Science needs to define its mission and show its members that it is worth their membership fees.*

If you are a research scientist and a fee-paying member of your relevant national or international professional society, then some of your cash probably goes to fund the ICSU. What is the ICSU? The acronym stands for the International Council of Scientific Unions, but the organization now calls itself the International Council for Science.

If you are asking what it does with your money, that is a good question. The ICSU and others have been asking the same thing.

The council has its secretariat in Paris, but in the past decade has opened regional offices representing Africa (based in Pretoria, South Africa), Latin America and the Caribbean (in Mexico City), and Asia and Pacific (in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).

Dozens of national scientific organizations from around the world are members of the ICSU and pay dues for the privilege. But that number will soon shrink by one.

Members of the International Union of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (IUBMB) have decided to go it alone. The organization has told the ICSU that it has cancelled its membership, effective from 1 January 2015. The IUBMB felt that it was not getting value for money: “The visibility of the ICSU on the international stage and its impact on science policy were considered insufficient to justify such expense,” it said in its resignation letter in September.

In an increasingly crowded marketplace for scientific bodies, the ICSU has to get its act together — and fast — if more of its members are not to follow suit.

Angelo Azzi, a vascular biologist at Tufts University in Boston, Massachusetts, and past president of the IUBMB, says that it is not about the money — the IUBMB paid just €3,395 (US\$4,240) in membership fees to the ICSU this year — but about the principle. Other grievances that the organization listed in its resignation letter include a lack of transparency over internal committee appointments, disproportionate expenditure on internal meetings compared with scientific activities, and lack of involvement of young scientists.

None of this would matter if the ICSU had not shown that it is capable of doing good things. It has — and they are worth paying for. Its flagship Future Earth programme, for instance, is a well-regarded global research platform for projects on sustainability.

It just needs more such efforts. An external expert-review panel that analysed the ICSU’s operations and submitted its report in July, ahead of the ICSU general assembly in Auckland, New Zealand, got that feeling too. As well as having low visibility, the ICSU lacks a clear vision, the panel said. The ICSU posted the report on its homepage last week.

In fact, the report criticizes most aspects of the ICSU’s operations. It offers a dire warning, saying that if the ICSU does not take its recommendations into account, “there is a serious risk that it will wither on the vine and become irrelevant over the next few years”.

The recommendations are that the ICSU should define a vision, adopt a strategy and put in place a plan to achieve both through a limited number of flagship projects. The vision, it says, should distinguish the

ICSU from other worldwide scientific players, such as the InterAcademy Council and the IAP, a global network of science academies, as well as the Global Research Council created in 2012. Furthermore, the ICSU’s governance needs to become more transparent, and more inclusive of gender and diversity agendas. The regional offices, which get most of their financing from local sources, need to have much more clearly defined relationships with the ICSU’s secretariat, governance and executive board.

**“In an increasingly crowded marketplace, the ICSU has to get its act together.”**

The report also criticizes the lack of balanced representation of all sciences in the ICSU’s activities, pointing out that biology does not get much of a showing. And it notes that the recommendations of the most recent previous review, back in 1996, have not been fully implemented.

The ICSU’s president, climatologist Gordon McBean of Western University in London, Canada, says that the organization is taking the report very seriously.

To be fair, the ICSU has a modest budget for a global organization: last year it brought in just €4.2 million. Much of that came from the subscriptions of its members, but €500,000 was provided by the French government. Still, as the report shows, getting the organization straight need not cost money. And scientists on the ground have the right to know what is being done in their name. ■

## Save the museums

*Italy’s curators must band together to preserve their valuable collections.*

Fausto Barbagli’s first curation job was at the University of Pavia in northern Italy. It was the end of the 1990s, and the university was finally starting to pay attention to its valuable but long-neglected zoological collections.

Barbagli is passionate about birds, so he was distressed to find that the labels had fallen off 700 precious taxidermied specimens, devastating their scientific value. A well-intentioned but untrained staff member had decided to spruce up the collection, gifted to the university three decades earlier. He had painted the birds’ pedestals — onto which species names had been inscribed — and had fixed neatly typed labels to their feet with rubber bands. As any professional curator knows, rubber perishes.

This story is emblematic of what has happened in historic scientific collections in universities and museums around Italy — some of