

Italy's research institutes urged to collaborate

Proposed merger scrapped, but cost savings and more efficient governance sought.

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The heads of Italy's 12 national research institutes have been asked to come up with ways of working more closely together, both to save money and to boost their ability to compete for research funds from the European Union.

Francesco Profumo, the country's research minister, included the request in the Stability Law, the national finance law for 2013–15, which Prime Minister Mario Monti will present to Italy's parliament this week. The law aims to save €11.6 billion (US\$15.1 billion) through spending cuts and a new tax on financial transactions.

The 12 institutes include the country's main science agency, the National Research Council, as well as the National Institute of Nuclear Physics, the Italian Space Agency and the National Institute for Astrophysics. Under the proposed law, the National Research Council will coordinate ideas for the plan, and proposals for reorganizing the research bodies to ensure more united and effective governance will be presented by the end of January 2013.

Merger proposal

The plan that is described in the Stability Law, however, is very different from Profumo's original proposal, made last week, for a merger of the 12 institutes into a single entity, a National Research Centre.

That proposal was highly unpopular with the institute heads, who complained that they had not even been consulted and only learned of the plan from a report in the national financial newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

"It was like a bolt from the blue, and we weren't even able to get access to any details of the reform's text," says Fernando Ferroni, president of the National Institute of Nuclear Physics, headquartered in Rome.

Shortly after the merger plan was reported in the press on 11 October, Profumo met the institute heads at what some of those present describe as an "awkward" meeting.

But Ferroni is pleased that their concerns have now been heard. "After the turmoil of the past days, I am more satisfied because the new text shows room for discussion and confrontation." However, he does not think that including reform of the national research system as one of many items in the national finance bill



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Italian research minister Francesco Profumo wants the country's research institutes to become more competitive in Europe.

was the right way to proceed.

Adriano De Maio, president of the AREA Science Park in Trieste, one of Italy's largest science parks, agrees. "The minister could have simply sent out an internal communication to the heads of the research institutes inviting them to gather and ponder a common proposal," he says.

A future in Europe

Sources close to Profumo say that the reform is not intended solely as a means of containing costs, but also as a way to improve the institutes' ability to compete for European funds in the European Union's next multi-year research funding programme, Horizon 2020, which starts in 2014.

"For every euro that Italy invests in research in Europe, only 40 cents come back. Italian researchers are of great value, but the network that governs them is fragmented, distributed in too many buildings and disconnected from the universities," Profumo has said previously.

Life has not been easy for Italy's research institutes. The past 15 years have seen four attempts at reform — most recently in 2011, when all of the institute heads were replaced by Profumo's predecessor Mariastella Gelmini. And in July this year major budget cuts were announced, which have not yet been implemented.

Giovanni Bignami, president of the Rome-based National Institute for Astrophysics, says that he cannot see any significant strategic plan in Profumo's latest initiative. "We just finished writing the new statutes" from the last round of reforms, he says.

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