

the road and end up putting all our eggs in the one basket of what is seen to be 'relevant' research." According to Cotgreave, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council has recently been told that a substantial proportion of the new funds awarded for this year must be spent on physics and chemistry research that is likely to contribute towards industrially-relevant research in the life sciences. "That is something that we need to keep an eye on," he says, adding, "of course science has to be useful, but a good proportion of the 'blue skies' research that is being done now is going to be useful at some point in the future."

The PREST report also shows that the

distribution of such activity has been far from even. In particular, the seven universities that received the largest income from industrial research grants, between them account for one-third of the total; in contrast, the 'bottom' half of the universities accounted for only eight percent of the funding.

On the other hand, the survey revealed considerable concern that the Research Assessment Exercise, the evaluation every four years of university departments that is used as a basis for calculating their government funding, is skewed towards academic performance alone, and does not take adequate account of valuable work carried out for industry.

Howard Newby, vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton, recently proposed the creation of a parallel Technology Transfer Assessment Exercise to ensure that a desire to build links with industry is "matched by a set of incentives embedded in our funding streams."

Such ideas are said to be under close scrutiny at the Department of Trade and Industry, where a number of initiatives—such as regional clusters bringing together local universities, industrial companies and government-backed regional development agencies—are being hatched to promote Britain as a 'knowledge-based economy'.

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Italy labors in its reform of the CNR

It hardly seems possible, but the planned reform of the Italian National Research Council (CNR) has become even more complicated. In an interview with *Nature Medicine*, Italy's new minister for research and universities, Ortensio Zecchino, who took up his post in a cabinet reshuffle last October, has insisted that he will forge ahead with most of the reforms proposed by the former government. However, if events proceed in the same anarchic fashion as they have to date, the reforms will not be ready by spring—Zecchino's deadline for their implementation.

Italy's previous government approved sweeping reforms of the CNR in a decree aimed at eliminating its role as Italy's primary public grant agency and reducing its size by shrinking the number of CNR laboratories from 300 to 100 in a bid to increase efficiency. However, the decree failed to receive complete approval before the government collapsed. Moreover, when he took office, Zecchino himself held back its approval at the end of last year—many believe on the advice of his political ally, CNR president Lucio Bianco—to evaluate the proposed changes.

Consequently, a joint parliamentary commission was formed in December to advise Zecchino on revisions to the original decree. This commission made its advice public on December 21st, and after being strongly influenced by CNR lobbyists who wanted to weaken Bianco's role, the commission proposed the creation of a special scientific network council made up of mainly CNR scientists.

This network would 'advise' the New Scientific Committee (NSC), which is to be created according to the original decree (*Nature* 394, 712; 1998). In turn, the NSC will advise a New Executive Committee (NEC), the creation of which was also proposed under the original decree. The NSC will evaluate research projects under a strictly advisory capacity to the NEC. Both of these new groups were to be headed by Bianco, but the parliamentary commission suggested that another president be elected to head the NSC.

Even before they returned their advice, it was widely anticipated that Zecchino

would reject the parliamentary commission's proposals, which he did. Many believe that this is based on his alliance with Bianco, but Zecchino's explanation for dismissing the Commission's suggestions is that they are driven by CNR self-interest tactics. He will retain Bianco as the head of both committees as proposed in the original decree and will not introduce a scientific network council.

To avoid the criticism that his decree will change nothing and that CNR research will still be dominated by the old establishment, Zecchino told *Nature Medicine* that he has made some alterations to the original decree (see box).

He insists that, contrary to increasing speculation, CNR's grant-giving power will be transferred to the government. CNR's budget is IL1,050 billion (US\$610 million), IL400 billion of which is spent on research. The budget is expected to increase by 30 percent in the next financial year.

But many scientists are concerned at the amount of government influence over the country's research that the changes will bring, and they doubt whether the 15 member NSC—which is small compared with the literally hundreds of individuals involved previously in research decisions—will be capable of properly evaluating projects from a variety of disciplines. Zecchino tried to allay these fears in the interview: "A small panel of experts will speed up the implementation of the government's aim to develop a National Science Policy." The idea that any measure can speed up this process is a welcome one.

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Ortensio Zecchino

Zecchino's alterations to the original CNR reform decree:

- To increase the number of non-CNR scientists on the 15-member NSC to two-thirds, rather than half, as proposed in the original decree.
- To increase government influence over the new, eight member NEC by allowing his research ministry to select four of the members and permitting the government's Assembly of Science and Technology office to select the remainder. The original draft allowed two members to be chosen by the CNR president.
- To increase employment mobility between the CNR and universities and implement measures according to which CNR research careers are subject to the same rigor and openness of selection introduced last year for academic appointments (*Nature Med.*, 4, 751 & 993; 1998).
- To introduce a new body comprising international scientists charged with evaluating the performance of individual CNR scientists.