EIT needs ‘significant’ reform, auditors find

Fourfold leverage of funds ‘undemonstrated and implausible’

Operation and management problems are impeding the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, and the institute requires “significant legislative and operational adjustments”, an investigation by the European Court of Auditors has found.

Established in 2008, and with a budget of €2.4 billion for 2014 to 2020, the EIT is intended to foster innovation by setting up Knowledge and Innovation Communities to encourage interaction between research, industry and education organisations. It has set up five KICs to date, for ICT, climate change, sustainable energy, health and raw materials, and this year it will launch KICs in food and added-value manufacturing.

But the auditors’ report, published on 14 April, found that the arrangements between the EIT and the KICs were “poorly suited to innovation”. It said that the EIT’s annual KIC funding “does not match the time horizon of the innovation activities the KICs are undertaking”. The monitoring and reporting arrangements for the KICs are “unnecessarily complicated”, it said.

The report also found that the EIT’s claims to have leveraged four times its core funding were “undemonstrated and implausible”, and that the KICs “are unlikely to reach financial sustainability”.

“Our basic idea is that the rationale of the EIT is a great one, but the way it is organised and the development of the KICs might be improved,” said lead auditor Alex Brenninkmeijer at the launch of the report.

The audit was carried out between December 2014 and June 2015, but could not be made public until the auditors received a response from the European Commission. That response, which is included in the report, said that the EIT had adopted measures to address its shortcomings, including changing its monitoring strategy and setting up a task force to work on simplification.

Another problem was a rapid turnover of senior management; the EIT has had five directors since 2008. Martin Kern was appointed interim director of the institute in August 2014, after 15 years at the Commission, mainly working on expansion policy. He said that the report was “positive” and that “it says the EIT is achieving its core goal” but that there is room for improvement.

Kern said that the EIT requires yearly business plans because the institute itself does not know its annual budget until the Commission announces it. That makes it “very difficult to make commitments more than several years in advance,” he said. But he added that the EIT had adopted strategic agendas for each KIC to give them longer-term perspectives. The institute also plans to give KICs more warning in future about the proportion of the EIT’s budget that each can expect.

He also said that the auditors’ assessment of the EIT’s leveraging was “not really correct”. Start-up companies in the climate KIC portfolio, for example, have attracted €56 million of external investment, he said. However, he accepted that the EIT “hasn’t been good enough in demonstrating and measuring these results”, and said that was why it had updated its monitoring strategy.

Commenting on the report, Peter Tindemans, secretary-general of the researchers’ association EuroScience, said that EIT’s awarding of full funding for some KIC activities and no funding at all for “complementary” activities was “asking for difficulties”. He added: “All that companies will do, in many cases, is identify existing projects or projects they would have started anyway and say these are linked to EIT-funded activities.”

It remained to be seen what impact the EIT’s more recent initiatives would have, the report said. At the launch, Brenninkmeijer said that the auditors were not satisfied with the Commission’s response on leveraging. However, he added that they had had good interactions with both the Commission and the EIT, and that this gave grounds for optimism.

In the next few weeks the auditors will present the report to the European Council and the budgetary control and research committees of the European Parliament, who will jointly determine the EIT’s place in future EU budgets.
Red lights flashing
What Moedas can learn from a critical EIT audit

The European Court of Auditors has delivered its long-awaited assessment of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, and it is scathing (see Cover). The auditors find that the EIT’s plans for its operating arms, the Knowledge and Innovation Communities, to undertake complementary activities—beyond their core grant funding—are unrealistic.

They also say that the KICs’ claims of generating additional funding and associated business activity are not borne out. And they note that there’s no visible path to sustainable funding, after support from the EU ends.

These and other critical findings appeared to surprise the Commission, which sat on the auditors’ report for almost a year in order to develop a rather feeble riposte to its charges. But they will surprise no-one else. The seeds for the EIT’s shortcomings were sown early on, and the problems highlighted by the auditors were widely anticipated.

The inspiration behind the EIT was the political wish to match the perceived success of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in using academic expertise to drive industrial innovation. Initially, the idea was to build from scratch in Strasbourg, as a quid pro quo for a proposal that MEPs abandon their plenary sessions in the French city.

When academics pointed out that there was no way that a brand new institute could compete with established universities for the best talent, the EIT’s backers, including Commission president at the time José Manuel Barroso and allies in the European Parliament, came up with a more experimental structure built on KICs, each of which involves several universities.

Since their foundation, the KICs have been making their own way, each taking a different approach to nurture graduate training, research and innovation. The EIT headquarters in Budapest, meanwhile, has lurched from crisis to crisis, with five different directors in five years and many senior staff positions left unfilled. It is hard to draw much that is positive from this unhappy history. Perhaps the only good thing that could come out of it would be if MEPs, member states and officials were to learn about the limitations of new panaceas in innovation policy.

As it happens, the Commission is considering just such a panacea: the proposed European Innovation Council. Like the EIT, the EIC has a sweeping title and a clear, if disarmingly broad, role: to nurture ‘innovation’ across the EU. Research commissioner Carlos Moedas initially said that he’d like it to do for innovation what the European Research Council did for research.

The trouble is that whereas the function and shape of the ERC could be copied from existing national research agencies, there is no reliable model for a European Innovation Council. Several options have been discussed, from an advisory council to oversee existing programmes, to a full-blown agency to design and implement new ones. But policymakers don’t really know how to inspire innovative economies.

The lessons from the EIT’s short history are clear, at least in this context. Don’t build new policy instruments just because they sound good. And don’t pour hundreds of millions of euros into untested instruments. It is usually better to get on with the mundane business of improving the ones you’ve already got.
Member states need to get moving on open access, says Smits

National policymakers must agree on concrete actions to bring about open publication of research before the summer, the Commission’s director-general for research Robert-Jan Smits has said, as the EU prepares to introduce mandatory requirements on data management. National research ministers must “take responsibility” for open access and “agree targets and how to achieve them” at the Competitiveness Council in May, Smits told a conference on open science hosted by the Dutch presidency on 4 April.

Former health commissioner loses employment appeal

The Court of Justice of the European Union has upheld a ruling that former EU commissioner John Dalli was not asked to resign following a lobbying scandal. The court found on 14 April that the General Court of the EU was correct when it ruled in May 2015 that former Commission president José Manuel Barroso had not asked Dalli to resign. The “mere mention” by Barroso that he could formally request Dalli’s resignation “cannot be equated with the actual use of that power”, the court said.

ERC announces Advanced Grant winners

The European Research Council awarded 277 Advanced Grants, worth a total of €647 million, on 14 April. The awards went to researchers in 21 countries. Institutions in the UK, with 69 awards, Germany, with 43, and France, with 30, topped the list. Overall the ERC received 1,953 proposals this round, translating to a success rate of 14 per cent.

China strikes Efsi deal

A technical agreement has been reached that will see Beijing contribute to the European Fund for Strategic Investments, it has been reported. The news site EurActiv reported that talks between the European Commission and China have concluded after a working group was set up last September. EU officials say that China will commit between €5 billion and €10bn.

Amsterdam wins innovation crown

The European Commission has awarded its European Capital of Innovation award for 2016 to the city of Amsterdam. The results of the annual award, launched in 2015 for cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants in EU member states or associate countries of Horizon 2020, were announced at a ceremony on 8 April.

Parliament holds back Iter budget, again

MEPs have refused to approve the 2014 budget of the Iter nuclear fusion facility under construction in France because the project has failed to address “growing project costs and delays”. MEPs on the European Parliament’s budgetary control committee recommended on 4 April that Parliament postpone the sign-off process for Iter’s 2014 budget.

Call for revamped European Defence Agency

A report for a European Parliament security and defence subcommittee has urged that the EU’s military research budget be “drastically increased”. The report, which was prepared by a specialist panel, calls for the money to be spent through a revamped European Defence Agency. The agency has not delivered because it has been kept on a “tight leash”, constrained by the need for unanimous decision-making by member states, the report said.
The battle ground

Academia and industry lobbies are rolling up their sleeves to try to influence the future of Horizon 2020. Amanda Stringfellow reports.

This year is set to be a busy one for Horizon 2020. Preparation of the final work plans for 2018 to 2020 began in January, with consultations on areas such as future and emerging technologies, electronic infrastructure and the societal challenges. The Horizon 2020 mid-term review will begin in the autumn; at the same time, the Commission plans to launch a consultation on the next seven-year Framework programme, beginning in 2021.

In preparation, lobbyists are finalising their wish lists. The signs are that, with no extra money likely, tension between the basic and applied research lobbies will rise as both push their priorities for societal challenges and the evaluation processes, among others.

**Much energy is being directed** into trying to raise the spending envelope for the period 2018-20, despite the fact that success in this area is highly unlikely. The EU budget is to be reviewed by the end of 2016, and MEPs and research groups alike are calling for money that was taken from Horizon 2020 for the European Fund for Strategic Investments last year to be replenished.

But with the EU beset by the refugee crisis, the best-case scenario would be fending off further cuts. Commission director-general for research Robert-Jan Smits has said that the research lobby will have to have “a very strong case to defend its budget”. And secretary-general of the League of European Research Universities, Kurt Deketelaere, says that his organisation has turned its attentions to finance ministers in a final attempt to gain traction.

Meanwhile, academic organisations say they have evidence that the persistent trade-off between basic and applied research has tipped too far towards the commercial end of the spectrum, and that they will be looking to redress the balance for the period 2018-20. Universities are “finding fewer opportunities to participate” in the societal challenges, says Lidia Borrell Damian, director of research at the European University Association. “Horizon 2020 clearly has a shift towards higher technology readiness levels—and this should be reconsidered.”

Academics are wielding an evaluation backed by the European Science Foundation that concluded collaborative basic research is not being sufficiently supported by the EU. Policymakers are therefore under significant pressure to show that they value academia, which could see rising focus on basic science in the societal challenges.

At the same time, preparations are being made to pilot a European Innovation Council in 2017, to tie in with commissioner Carlos Moedas’ open innovation offensive. Luc Soete, an economist at Maastricht University and chairman of the Commission’s research advisory group, says that the EIC could pull together existing innovation programmes rather than create anything new—an argument that could be strengthened by the European Court of Auditors’ critical assessment of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology.

And the European Association of Research and Technology Organisations is calling for an EIC pilot to fill gaps in existing support for both innovation R&D and infrastructure, as well as looking at how to work with the European Investment Bank to do so. But the Commission must tread a fine line on funding, even among supporters of the idea, says Dan Andréé, head of the Brussels office of the Swedish innovation agency Vinnova. “If there is another taxation on global challenges to finance this pilot, many member states would not be in favour.”

**The Commission got the ball rolling** on its 2018-20 funding priorities with a weighty strategic foresight report headed by Gill Ringland, a computer scientist and entrepreneur. Ringland says that data ownership stands out as an issue; calls should address whether governments, businesses or individuals will own relevant data, and issues of inequality “where people who know how to manage their own personal data will do well and those who don’t won’t”, she says.

A shift in the focus of energy research is also needed, she says, to consider the fact that developments in solar panels could cause energy prices to plummet. “This is a perspective that hasn’t been included in previous programmes.”

Others are calling for more opportunities for the social sciences and humanities to address human factors in societal challenges, while research managers are looking to improve the experience of applicants. These alterations are likely to be minor, and could include greater use of two-stage evaluation processes and a narrower focus for some calls, to tackle oversubscription.

Draft 2018-20 work programmes will begin circulating at the end of 2016, and a report by Commission advisers on the Horizon 2020 mid-term review is due in May 2017. This will reveal which input will be included, and which held back for the successor Framework programme.

Smits has already acknowledged that amendments to legislation will have to wait until 2021, because of the time needed to enact them. So it may be that research lobbyists have to wait a little longer to see the results of their input in action.
Moedas visits Iran to push scientific collaboration

Research commissioner Carlos Moedas took part in a series of high-level meetings in Iran’s capital Tehran this week, signing a commitment to boost research and innovation cooperation with the country.

Moedas met Iranian science minister Mohammad Farhadi and vice-president for Science and Technology Sorena Sattari to agree how to raise the participation of Iranian academics in Horizon 2020 and the Euratom programme for nuclear research and training, as well as increase mobility and cooperation on collaborative research.

The two-day visit, led by the EU high representative for foreign affairs, Federica Mogherini, came after the EU lifted all nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions against Iran in January, as the country agreed measures to ensure the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme.

Theoretical physicist John Ellis, a former head of international cooperation at Cern, said scientific collaboration between the regions would be much easier now that sanctions had been lifted. In the past, Iranian academics attempting to take part in European projects faced difficulties such as getting banks to transfer financial contributions, transporting electronic equipment between regions and overcoming political tensions, he said.

This could provide a valuable opportunity for Europe to benefit from a rapidly growing research base in Iran.

In 2012, Iranian academics published some 24,000 scientific articles in international journals, almost 18 times as many as in 2000.

But tapping this potential will involve more than an agreement between officials, said Rouzbeh Parsi, director of the European Iran Research Group at Lund University in Sweden. Successful collaboration would rely on how well the agreement can be institutionalised.

Parsi suggested the EU set up outreach programmes to explain its funding process to Iranian institutions, and earmark money to back specific projects of mutual interest. “You need to fund projects to make that political priority become a reality. Without this, collaboration won’t happen as quickly as it should,” he said.

Ali Ansari, president of the British Institute of Persian Studies, said that while the lifting of sanctions was an important first step, people were overestimating how quickly logistical issues—such as difficulties securing visas and banking processes—would resolve themselves. “The reintegration of Iran into a global economy will be a slow process, and in terms of major research collaborations the practicalities are going to take time to work out,” he said.

Commission hands out €5m in Horizon 2020 appeal

A computer scientist from University College London in the UK has successfully overturned a grant rejection by the European Commission on the basis of evaluation error, resulting in the award of a €5-million Horizon 2020 grant.

Peter Coveney hired lawyers to assist him in the Commission’s internal appeal process, after his proposal to set up centres of excellence for computer science through a 2014 e-infrastructure call was rejected.

The call text stated that there should be strong business involvement in the project and that it should be of a commercial standard, Coveney said. But evaluators rejected his application on the grounds of unnecessary management outsourcing. “When I read that I knew there was something wrong,” Coveney said.

The verdict was made public on 29 March, 10 months after the appeal was initiated. Describing the process as long and arduous, Coveney said that he employed London-based law firm Bindmans to aid him in the appeal at a cost of around £10,000. Coveney said that colleagues told him that the process would not be worthwhile, and that he would “rock the boat”. However, he maintained that there had been a clear procedural error.

“When you can see there’s a problem, you’re right to challenge it—but you had better do it professionally or you will be walked over,” he said.

A successful appeal is rare, with Framework 7 statistics indicating only 10 out of 3,683 appeals were upheld. Peter Tindemans, secretary-general of researchers’ association EuroScience, said that Coveney’s case underlined concerns that applicants have regarding evaluation procedures. However, he said that he didn’t believe that the number of researchers using solicitors would grow. “Most people are too busy for that—people don’t have the habit of turning to lawyers.”

Peter Fisch, former head of Framework programme evaluation at the Commission, said that the case highlighted the effectiveness of the appeal process. “As long as evaluations are carried out by humans, we will see cases like this,” he said. “What has happened is good news for trust in the integrity of the system.”
The drawing board

Michael Gaebel from the European University Association speaks to Laura Stevens about a pending update of the EU’s higher education agenda.

The man in charge of drafting the European University Association’s response to the latest consultation on EU higher education policy has strong views about the state of Europe in 2016. “The European Union is not at its best,” says Michael Gaebel, director of the higher education policy unit at the EUA. “The agenda that we believed in at the beginning of the 21st century, of a union that will rise and get stronger, is not the situation we now face.”

Over the past two decades, there has been “massive change” for higher education through the Europe-wide Bologna process, Gaebel explains. This collective effort by universities, public authorities and quality assurance agencies has initiated structural reforms in the academic world, promoting a universal three-tier higher education system, making it easier to transfer qualifications across borders.

But now, universities face new political challenges, including questions over the future of Schengen and the UK’s place in the union, Gaebel says, as well as the impact of the financial crisis and growing instability in eastern and southern countries.

It is these challenges that need to be tackled by the planned update to the Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education in the EU, he says. This political strategy document, published by the European Commission, articulates the EU’s priorities and sets out how it hopes to improve the state of universities in the years to come. Since its inception in 2005, the agenda was updated in 2011, and the third iteration is scheduled this year.

In November 2015, the door was opened for individuals, governments and university organisations to provide input. By the deadline of 29 February, the Commission had received 48 submissions to its consultation, as well as 1,500 responses to an online questionnaire to feed into its final plan.

Ahead of the consultation, the Commission had suggested its 2016 agenda priorities could be: making university learning more relevant, improving the impact of institutions on their local regions, and better linking education and research. After speaking with members, Gaebel said it was clear the 850 institutions that the EUA represented were in broad agreement.

On the first priority, feedback from EUA members was that the EU should consider tying together localised efforts to improve ICT and online learning. It should also look at ways to prepare graduates for careers such as entrepreneurship or self-employment, as well as focusing on social and citizenship skills, the EUA said.

Regional innovation should be included to build on progress made under the Smart Specialisation strategies for structural funds. Meanwhile, progress on research standards must not forget the importance of teaching quality and the development of the European Research Area must go “hand in hand” with the European Higher Education Area, the EUA said.

But the EUA has also suggested a further four priorities that would help universities tackle the bigger political issues that they face; and improvement in sustainable funding is top of the list. “You can put up whatever goals you want but if institutions are no longer in a position to address them, then nothing will happen,” says Gaebel.

The EUA also calls for the agenda to consider how universities can respond to the so-called Science 2.0 agenda of globalisation and digitisation; and to promote inclusiveness and internationalisation, for example through refugee programmes and international exchange.

“The point we were trying to make is if the Commission wants to succeed with its three priorities, they must address the issues a little bit more broadly,” says Gaebel.

The consultation report is due to be published in June, as part of the Commission’s EU Skills Agenda package. The agenda doesn’t have legal or regulatory power—and Gaebel acknowledges that national governments are not obliged to take up its recommendations. “Member states are not always particularly happy with what the Commission suggests, and often make it clear that is it they who decide,” he says. “But I think they’re interested in the advice, and are ready to discuss that.”

Overall, Gaebel says the effect of the agenda should not be underestimated. The financial support the Commission provides in line with its modernisation plan is significant, Gaebel says. And after the 2011 agenda, the Commission launched its U-Multirank university ranking, made changes to the Erasmus student exchange programme and pushed forward with a European Industrial PhD scheme.

Gaebel is confident that the EUA’s position will be reflected in the final agenda. “While everything might not be taken up word for word, I’m sure it will have an impact.”

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Professors lose appetite for innovation after rights reform

The Bayh-Dole act is one of the most significant landmarks in the history of innovation policy. Passed in the United States in 1980, it transferred the rights to inventions produced in universities from the government to the institutions, boosting universities’ incentives to commercialise research.

Europe’s universities are widely seen as less entrepreneurial than their US counterparts. In a bid to catch up, several European countries, including Germany, have also shifted intellectual property rights to universities. Unlike in the US, however, the rights didn’t rest with government in the first place; instead, they were transferred to institutions from researchers.

Under the old regime—known as the professor’s privilege—researchers in several European countries had blanket rights to their inventions. In Norway, we have found that ending this arrangement has had the opposite effect to that intended.

The professor’s privilege ended in all Norwegian public higher education institutions on 1 January 2003, following a unanimous parliamentary vote. Formal ownership rights to the commercialisation of research, including startups and patents, passed to Norwegian universities, each of which established a technology transfer office. The motivation behind the reform was to stimulate innovation.

Researchers retained a third of the net income from commercialisation. In effect, then, the change reduced an inventor’s expected pre-tax income by two-thirds. This represents a substantial increase in the effective tax rate on researchers’ ventures and patentable inventions.

This shock to income rights might be expected to reduce researchers’ incentive to invent. For universities, however, there was a corresponding increase in incentive for facilitating commercialisation. From this, then, it is not clear whether the reform would lead to less or more innovation.

In reality, the year after the transfer of rights, Norwegian researchers founded half as many companies and filed half as many patents as in the last year of the professor’s privilege. In contrast, the number of start-ups and patents produced by inventors and entrepreneurs outside universities remained approximately the same.

One reason for the crash in commercialisation could be that researchers got more selective; quantity went down but quality went up. The data, however, suggest that quality also went south: after the reform, university start-ups have had lower survival and growth rates, and university patents have received fewer citations.

Thus, not only has the amount of commercialisation fallen, several quality measures have also declined.

One could imagine that universities’ newly instated technology transfer offices would initially be relatively unskilled but would improve with experience. If this has been the case, however, it has not affected researchers’ behaviour. For start-ups, there was no sign of recovery five years on, the latest point for which we have data. For patents, we can follow university researchers until 2010 and the same picture emerges: there is no bounce back.

The commercialisation of research depends on investment by both the researcher and the university. Incentives aimed at promoting university investment may matter especially if researchers cannot easily replicate the contribution of their institutions. This perspective might be thought to justify a royalty-sharing regime that balances rights across parties, rather than giving everything to one party, as under the professor’s privilege.

On the other hand, some previous analyses have argued that university resources contribute little to innovation relative to researchers’ efforts, and that rights regimes that create incentive conflicts between parties will have a chilling effect on innovation. Such analyses argue for curtailing the role of technology transfer offices and increasing researchers’ rights.

Our analysis is broadly consistent with this. Perhaps the likeliest cause is the very large decline in income rights to researchers. If university researchers are the crucial engines of innovation, then substantially weakening their financial incentives may naturally cause the researchers to innovate a lot less.

Little is known about the best legislative environment to spur commercialisation. These stark findings suggest that the Norwegian reform was highly counterproductive. They also raise questions about other European countries that have eliminated the professor’s privilege. If the Norwegian pattern holds, one would imagine that increasing researchers’ rights to the fruits of their work would increase the rate of start-ups and patenting.

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‘Not only has the amount of innovation fallen, quality measures have also declined.’
Queuing for the exit

Five years after the crushed promise of the Arab Spring, Ehsan Masood finds that Egypt’s young people have all but lost hope.

My first trip to Egypt in nearly four years coincides with a state visit from the king of Saudi Arabia, Salman bin Abdulaziz. Back in 2012, young people were in the forefront of the democratic revolutions that rocked the Arabic-speaking world. Today, those dreams of free speech and nation-building lie brutally crushed. Instead, Egypt’s president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a former general, is welcoming the head of an autocratic royal family.

The king is on a mission to create an arc of nations opposed to both Iran and the so-called Islamic State. The centrepiece of his visit is a plan for a bridge across the Red Sea linking two “brotherly” nations. Saudi Arabia already has one giant bridge, linking it to Bahrain. When Bahrainis rose up against their ruling family in 2011, the bridge was a convenient short cut for the Saudi tanks invited by the Bahraini royals to crush the uprising. Commentators are asking if one day the same could happen here in Egypt.

Save our library

My first stop is the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the new Library of Alexandria. I’m speaking at a biennial life-sciences conference called BioVision, run in partnership with France. The event has often attracted thousands of students eager to hear from some of the world’s leading researchers, and the queues are as long now as in any previous year. What’s new is a metal barrier at the library’s perimeter. A short distance away I spot two armoured personnel carriers, their machine gunners watching intently.

The security is motivated both by political tension and by the library’s curious political history. During the 2011 revolutions, some protesters targeted the library because of its connection to the hated regime of former president Hosni Mubarak—his wife Suzanne chaired its board of trustees. But when the library’s users realised what was happening, men and women alike poured out of its reading rooms. Together with fellow scholars from the nearby Alexandria University, they formed a human cordon that, successfully and non-violently, deterred the would-be attackers.

Beside the seaside

The Arabic word for revolution is *thawra*. This word needs to be uttered in hushed tones as the secret police from the Mubarak era have resumed operations, infiltrating the population and reporting dissenters. The recent murder of Giulio Regeni—an Italian postgraduate student from the University of Cambridge who was tortured to death in Egypt—is believed to be the work of the security forces.

But ‘infiltration’ is perhaps too grand a term for what the secret police are doing. In previous years I learned how to spot them: they were the people standing for hours outside the city’s seafront hotels staring out to sea. Staying at one such hotel, I can see that this approach hasn’t changed.

And yet, businesses—at least multinationals—seem to be benefiting from the relative stability brought by Sisi’s coup. Here at the BioVision conference, *Research—* publisher of *Research Europe*—as well as Elsevier, Microsoft, Springer Nature and many other global publishers are present.

EU to the rescue

The day after BioVision I am in Cairo for the annual research conference at Ain Shams University. It is one of Egypt’s oldest universities and is located on the site of a former Ottoman palace.

Compared with Alexandria, Cairo is edgy, energetic and chaotic. The palace is surprisingly hard to find and I turn up at the wrong place. I’m saved by a fellow visitor who happens to work for the EU. We jump into her car and she weaves through the Cairo traffic to take me to where I am supposed to be. In my rescuer’s car we listen to Gene Kelly crooning *Singing in the Rain*. That’s an unusual choice, I remark. “It reminds me of better times,” she says ruefully.

Security for whom?

In nearly 20 years of visiting this country, I have rarely found young Egyptians so despondent. “Everyone wants to leave,” a social sciences student tells me. Another says that he’s taught himself Japanese from YouTube films. It will be his ticket to Tokyo, he hopes. The mother of an economist says that her daughter spends her spare time surfing the web for opportunities abroad. And an engineer almost wells up when I ask her why she can see no future for herself in Egypt.

“Aren’t you at least satisfied that Egypt isn’t Syria? That there’s a degree of peace and security.” This is my somewhat inappropriate attempt at a counter argument. “Security for whom?” she shoots back. “My friends are dead. Those alive are in prison and being tortured. And you have the audacity to call that security?”

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EU common agricultural policy
The Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development invites tenders for a framework contract for the evaluation of common agricultural policy measures contributing to the general objective of viable food production. The contract is worth €5.4 million over 72 months. [3]

EU chronic kidney diseases
The Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety invites proposals for its pilot project on chronic kidney diseases. The total budget is €6 million. [5]

EU environmental challenges
The ERA-Net ERANETMED invites applications for its joint call on environmental challenges and solutions for vulnerable communities. The overall budget is €11.45 million. Projects may last from two to three years. [25]

EU food risk assessment
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EU pest management
ERA-Net C-IPM invites applications for its second call for transnational research projects on integrated pest management in Europe. The budget is €7.3 million. Projects are funded for up to three years. [33]

EU transnational research
ERA-Net Smart Grids Plus invites proposals for its second joint call for transnational research projects on smart grids. This supports the development of the technologies, market designs and consumer and production technologies. Grants are worth between €500,000 and €4 million each.

EU economics fellowships
The Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs invites tenders for its fellowship initiative. This enables researchers to re-examine challenges to economic integration at the global and the European level at the current juncture and to explore the policy options to address these challenges. 15 fellowships, with an award amount of up to €15,000 each, are available.

EU common agricultural policy
The Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development invites tenders for a framework contract for the evaluation of common agricultural policy measures contributing to the general objective of viable food production. The tender will evaluate viable food production, one of the three general objectives of the common agricultural policy, as specified in Article 110 of Regulation No 1306/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council. The contract is worth €5.4 million over 72 months.

EU interpreting
The Directorate-General for Interpreting invites proposals for financial support for training in conference interpreting. This supports the organisation of postgraduate courses and projects aimed at supporting interpreter training. A total budget of €600,000 is available.

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Highlights
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Deadline: 20 June 2016

Email: sante-pp-calls@ec.europa.eu

EU sea basin research

The Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, in collaboration with the Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, invites applications for its blue technology – innovative solutions for transfer to sea basin economies call. This aims to support strategic traditional partnerships in developing joint roadmaps at sea basin level in order to coordinate investments for innovation in a specific blue growth technology, domain or value chain and to mobilise public-private partnerships that will develop two to three demonstration projects. The total budget is €2.52 million, which may be increased by 20 per cent. Eligible projects between around €600,000 and €800,000 will be funded.

Web id: 1189054
Email: easme-emff-calls@ec.europa.eu
Deadline: 30 September 2016

Nordic marine projects

The Nordic Council of Ministers’ Marine Group invites applications for its call for projects. This aims to improve marine and coastal environments by generating scientific data and to create the foundation for joint initiatives to combat pollution in the region. Project expenses, including administrative expenses, materials, equipment and travel for conferences may be covered.

Web id: 1173513
Email: maritag@uvmr.fo
Deadline: 1 June 2016

Endocrinology & biotechnology

The Novo Nordisk Foundation invites applications for its postdoctoral fellowship programme within endocrinology and metabolism in international elite research environments. This offers research researchers in the Nordic countries the opportunity to conduct basic, translational or clinical research projects in the field of endocrinology and metabolism.

Up to six fellowships, each worth DKK 1 million (€134,400) per year, over four years, are available.

Web id: 1157990
Email: hfpsnakasone@hfps.org
Deadline: 13 May 2016

Biological sciences award

The Human Frontier Science Programme invites nominations for the Nakasone award. This recognises scientists who have undertaken frontier-moving research in biology, encompassing conceptual, experimental or technological breakthroughs. The award is worth US$10,000 ($9,450).

Web id: 1157990
Email: hfpsnakasone@hfps.org
Deadline: 13 May 2016

Computing mathematics

The European Research Consortium for Informatics and Mathematics (ERCIM) will specifically be inviting nominations for the Cor Baayen award. This recognises a researcher in computer science and applied mathematics. The award is worth €5,000.

Web id: 208098
Email: claude.kirchner@inria.fr
Deadline: 15 May 2016

Cardiovascular exchanges

The European Society of Cardiology invites applications for its first contact initiative grants. These support the establishment of research links between scientists from European institutions and hosting institutions in a foreign country within or outside Europe. Five grants are available, each worth up to €2,500.

Web id: 1161384
Email: council@escardio.org
Deadline: 25 May 2016

Dermatology award

Chanel Research and Technology invites applications for the Chanel-Ceries research award. This supports research on the subject of physiology or biology of healthy skin and its reaction to environmental factors. One award is available, worth €40,000 for one year.

Web id: 218222
Email: rt.award@chanel-corp.com
Deadline: 1 June 2016

Cardiology grants

The European Society of Cardiology’s Heart Rhythm Association invites applications for the Proctor programme. This enables cardiologists to learn specific techniques and procedures in the fields of arrhythmias and cardiac pacing and to further the career of former EHRA fellows on their return to their home country. Mentors, and allied professionals will each receive €500 plus travel and accommodation. Mentors will also receive €500 plus travel and accommodation, and the host centre will receive €2,000.

Web id: 1179881
Email: ehra@escardio.org
Deadline: 29 July 2016

Infectious disease research

The Institut Pasteur International Division invites applications for its doctoral programme Calmette and Yersin. This allows researchers to conduct their PhD in an institute within the Institut Pasteur International Network (RIF) outside of France. Funding covers living expenses, insurance and one return ticket per year for three years.

Web id: 1178495
Email: bourses-international@pasteur.fr
Deadline: 31 July 2016

Cardiovascular imaging

The European Society of Cardiology’s Car- work Imaging Association invites applications for its training grants. These support researchers in the field of non-invasive imaging modalities in gaining experience and skills in a clinical centre or university with a large domain expertise within an ESC member country other than their own. Grants include €5,000 per month for subsistence and €500 per month for the host institution, for between three and six months.

Web id: 1183320
Email: eacvi@escardio.org
Deadline: 30 September 2016

Humanities scholarships

The Zeit-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius invites applications for its trajectory of change scholarships. These support researchers in social sciences and history researching the dynamics of political change and impact on societies. Scholarships include a monthly stipend of €1,200 for up to three years, plus field work grants up to €3,000, and international travel grants are worth up to a total of €5,000.

Web id: 1189614
Email: bartels@zeit-stiftung.de
Deadline: 12 May 2016

Research cooperation award

The Helmholtz Association invites applications for its Helmholtz international fellow award. This aims to intensify cooperation between Helmholtz centres and international research institutes. Up to ten awards, worth €20,000 each, are available.

Web id: 1178621
Email: marianne.feldmann@helmholtz.de
Deadline: 23 May 2016

Sustainable development

The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) invites applications for its green talents competition. This enables young scientists, working on sustainable development, to visit Germany for a two-week science forum, followed by a research stay of up to three months. Both visits to Germany are fully financed.

Web id: 1159300
Email: greentalents@dir.de
Deadline: 24 May 2016

EU satellite navigation

The European Global Navigation Satellite Systems Agency invites applications for the European satellite navigation competition. This recognises ideas and solutions for the commercial application of satellite navigation. The competition offers 30 regional and special prizes, worth approximately €1 million in total. The overall winner will receive €20,000.

Web id: 1159194
Email: support@esnsc.eu
Deadline: 30 June 2016

Diabetes research

The European Foundation for the Study of Diabetes, in collaboration with the Diabetes Research Foundation and Lilly invite applications for research grants under their European programme in type 1 diabetes research. These promote basic and clinical biomedical research, expedite the practical application of scientific advances, encourage clinical translational research and increase awareness of type 1 diabetes. Grants are normally worth up to €100,000 for a minimum period of one year. Grants of up to €400,000 will be considered for clinical projects.

Web id: 201616
Email: foundation@ead.org
Deadline: 1 July 2016

Chemicals and environment

The Nordic Chemicals Group under the Nordic Council of Ministers invites applications for its call for projects. The aim is to minimise negative health and environmental effects from chemicals in products, emissions and waste. Approximately 500 projects or activities are funded.

Web id: 1172632
Email: heldrun@umvverfistofnun.is
Deadline: 15 June 2016

EU environmental challenges

The ERA-Net ERANETMED invites applications for its call on environmental challenges and solutions for vulnerable communities. This supports transnational research on sustainable solutions for the environmental challenges of Euro-Mediterranean vulnerable communities. The overall budget is €1.5 million. Projects may last from two to three years.

Web id: 1189093
Email: info@eraeranetmed.eu
Deadline: 31 May 2016

EU food risk assessment

The European Food Safety Authority invites applications for its call on methodology development in risk assessment. This supports projects that develop and validate new models and tools, make the best use of the scientific data available or generate new data, to be applied for identifying emerging food risks, assessing the risk of mycotoxin mixtures in food and feed and assessing the freedom from disease or infection. The total budget is approximately €1.13 million. Projects receive up to €375,000 each.

Web id: 1189489
Email: efsaprocurement@efsa.europa.eu
Deadline: 6 October 2016

Roman scholarships

The Lemmermann Foundation invites applications for its scholarship awards. These enable master’s and doctoral students to carry out classical studies and humanities research in Rome. Awards are worth up to €750 per month.

Web id: 1160318
Email: lemmermann@nexus.it
Deadline: 15 March 2017
EU Mediterranean agriculture
ERA-Net ARIMNet invites applications for its joint call for transnational research projects. This supports research projects aimed at producing innovations for the greening of agriculture and food systems to sustain social and economic development.

Haematology awards
The European Haematology Association, under the career development programme, invites applications for the following awards:
- Advanced short term collaboration award, worth up to €20,000.
- Junior short term collaboration award, worth up to €10,000.

Green research and innovation
NordForsk, along with Nordic Innovation and Nordic Energy Research, invites proposals for green research and innovation grants:
- module I, worth between NOK10 million (€1.1 million) to NOK20m per project.
- module II, worth up to NOK 6 million (€644,600) per project.

Mathematics prize
The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters invites nominations for the Abel prize. This recognises scientific work in the field of mathematics, including mathematical aspects of computer science, mathematical physics, probability, numerical analysis and scientific computing, statistics and applications of mathematics in the sciences. The prize is worth NOK6 million (€684,100).

EU pest management
ERA-Net C-IPM invites applications for its second call for transnational research in integrated pest management in Europe. This aims to ensure a higher level of implementation of integrated pest management among European farmers by creating synergies from national investments in research and extension. The budget is €7.3 million. Projects are funded for up to three years.

Mathematical research prize
Fundacio Ferran Sunyer i Balaguer invites submissions for the Ferran Sunyer i Balaguer prize. This recognises an expository mathematical monograph, presenting the latest developments in mathematics. The prize is worth €15,000.

Ecosystem and biodiversity
The Nordic Council of Ministers’ Terrestrial Ecosystem Group invites applications for its call for projects. The main objective is to curb negative trends in biodiversity, maintain robust ecosystems and continue to deliver the ecosystem services necessary for welfare and economic growth. Projects should last one year.

Swiss short research visits
The Swiss National Science Foundation invites applications for its international short visits. These allow Swiss researchers to go abroad for a short period and foreign researchers to collaborate with researchers in Switzerland. Grants cover travel and living expenses. Support ranges from CHF3,000 (€2,800) to CHF3,500 per month.

Rare disease research
The Foundation for the Development of Internal Medicine in Europe invites applications for its research grants. These support internists to develop research in the field of rare diseases in adults. Grants are worth €20,000 each for a maximum period of one year.

Craniomaxillofacial trauma
The A0 Foundation invites applications for the Clinical Investigation and Documentation clinical research fellowship programme for surgeons – cranio maxillofacial trauma. This enables surgeons to gain training and experience in clinical research, including study planning, monitoring, data analysis and publication, by spending three months at the foundation’s Clinical Investigation and Documentation branch office in Switzerland. Up to two fellowships are available.

NERC ecosystem services
The Natural Environment Research Council, under the ecosystem services for poverty alleviation programme, invites applications for its regional opportunities fund. This assists ESPA projects, groups of projects and their local stakeholders to enhance the impact and research uptake of funded projects and of the ESPA programme as a whole. Each grant is worth up to £50,000 (€62,800) over 12 months.
**Tenders**

**Observing system** *ESA*

The European Space Agency invites tenders for an ocean observing system evaluation of satellite sea surface salinity and El Nino 2015. The tenderer will design, implement and report on an observing system evaluation of satellite sea surface salinity during the strong El Nino 2015 event. The contract is worth between €200,000 and €500,000. Ref: 15.115.21, AO8575, SMOS-NINO15. Deadline: 13 May 2016

**Numerical simulations** *ESA*

The European Space Agency invites tenders for numerical simulations for spacecraft catastrophic disruption analysis. The tenderer will numerically characterise the debris cloud distribution that results from orbital hypervelocity collision of a satellite with a secondary object of various sizes up to the complete satellite. The contract is worth between €200,000 and €500,000. Ref: 15.197.19. Deadline: 25 May 2016

**Interference scenarios** *ESA*

The European Space Agency invites tenders for radio frequency interference scenarios, applications requirements and counteraction techniques. The tenderer will perform a detailed analysis of applications and services and related interfering scenarios in the areas of telecommunications, navigation and earth observation. The contract is worth in excess of €500,000. Ref: 16.1E7.07. Deadline: 26 May 2016

**Snow analysis** *ESA*

The European Space Agency invites tenders for the SnowSAR campaign data analysis study. The tenderer will determine the temporal and spatial variability of the snow cover over the campaign areas by means of in-situ data, and compare with the SnowSAR data, snow process models driven by meteorological data, output of numerical weather prediction models and passive microwave data. The contract is worth between €200,000 and €500,000. Ref: 15.155.03. Deadline: 26 May 2016

**Channel filters** *ESA*

The European Space Agency invites tenders for filters and diplexer with improved in-band performance. The tenderer will develop and demonstrate novel concepts to improve the in-band performance of channel filters. The contract is worth between €200,000 and €500,000. Ref: 16.1E7.00. Deadline: 20 June 2016

**Inter-satellite links** *ESA*

The European Space Agency invites tenders for network and link layer solutions for inter-satellite links between small satellites. The tenderer will design and develop link and network layer mechanisms to enable the routing of data over inter-satellite links between smaller satellites. The contract is worth between €200,000 and €500,000. Ref: 15.17.54. Deadline: 1 July 2016

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**Policy diary**

**May**


19 Water JPI Conference, Rome, Italy. http://rsrc.co/1Og0aV

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**Letters to Research Europe**

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[a*Research] publication
Following reports of discrimination at Cern, Laura Stevens reports on how homophobia is being tackled at the facility and across Europe.

The renowned European laboratory Cern usually makes headlines for its pioneering discoveries in particle physics. But earlier this year, a darker side of life at the Geneva laboratory was revealed when reports of derogatory graffiti about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees circulated in the press.

Cern condemned the actions, which included the defacement of LGBT posters with the slur “Schwein”, meaning pig in German, and other abuse. Cern has strongly criticised the behaviour on several occasions, a spokesman says, through internal communications from the director-general and its ombudsman. The organisation has also taken disciplinary action, he says.

But there have been at least 10 incidents of defacing posters for LGBT Cern, a society established in 2010 to represent LGBT staff at the laboratory, the group has said. And society members say that the discrimination doesn’t stop there. “Direct abuse is quite uncommon. Almost no one is foolish enough to be openly abusive,” says an LGBT engineer at Cern who wished to remain anonymous. “The problem tends to be in people being reluctant to work with me or with lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender colleagues. This is where my career starts to suffer.”

**There is a prevailing philosophy in science** that makes it harder to speak about sexuality and gender issues, says David Smith, a chemist at the University of York. The expectation, he says, is that scientists should be as dispassionate and detached about personal issues as they are about their work. “There is, broadly speaking an unspoken policy of don’t ask don’t tell, just get on with the science,” he says.

Some LGBT scientists are limited from travelling to countries where their human rights will not be respected. Many also worry about the impact on their professional progress if they choose to come out. “It only takes one lukewarm reference to damage a scientist’s career,” says Smith. “The science system is one of mentorship and apprenticeship. Personal connections matter.”

Physicist Aidan Randle-Conde joined Cern in 2010. “Finding myself in a lab of around 10,000 people with no way of finding other LGBT people was a bit intimidating,” he says. As part of an “invisible minority” he says, it was hard to find support. As a result, he worked hard to set up the society LGBT Cern to connect with others.

Randle-Conde says that he wanted validation from Cern for the society, to give it the support that is critical in the early stages. However, official recognition was a long time coming. In pursuit of its campaign, the group sought out an official standard, which it found in the form of a 2010 recommendation from the Council of Europe.

As an intergovernmental organisation responsible for overseeing civil liberties through the European Court of Human Rights, the council’s members at the time included all the member states involved with Cern. In its recommendation, it outlined measures to combat discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. One was to remove “excessive formalities” for LGBT societies to gain institutional recognition, and a second was for any homophobic behaviour to be officially condemned.

Randle-Conde says that the council’s recommendation was critical in helping LGBT Cern gain institutional support. But he says that the impact of the recommendation has so far been limited simply because there is a widespread lack of awareness about it, even among international institutions such as Cern.

The text is not legally binding, and Dennis van der Veur—a former adviser to the Council of Europe, now at the Vienna-based EU Agency for Fundamental Rights—acknowledges its limits. He says that wide-scale implementation of the recommendation is needed if LGBT rights are to be adequately protected across Europe.

Progress requires the combination of the official recommendation, which can support grassroots initiatives, and the work of those groups themselves to drive the change, he says. “Having written recommendations is one thing, but for them to become reality is another,” he says.

The Cern engineer echoes this sentiment, describing grassroots organisations as “the prime movers” in making progress. “The interaction of grassroots groups like LGBT Cern is essential in showing the wider community that we are no different in our hopes for equal treatment and the right to full social inclusion.”

For Smith, the UK’s Royal Society of Chemistry’s 175 Faces of Chemistry exhibition—launched this year to celebrate the diversity of successful chemists—is an example of best practice. For him, initiatives such as this are the only way organisations can really tackle inequality.

“Change in culture at a broader level is usually best engendered by bottom-up approaches rather than top-down imposition,” he says. “I would say this process is just starting with regard to sexuality in science.”

**Recommendations are one thing; for them to become reality is another.**
Innovate UK embraces simplification

The UK’s innovation agency is to reorganise its funding programmes to address concerns that they are too complex, and to make it easier for the agency to work with universities, businesses and the research councils.

Innovate UK’s 2016-17 delivery plan, published on 7 April, sets out how it will simplify its funding streams and where it will spend its core budget of £561 million (£703m), which is set by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The crux of the plans to simplify the agency is to reorganise the areas that it supports into four main themes: emerging and enabling technologies; health and life sciences; infrastructure systems; and manufacturing and materials. The streams will cut across all of the agency’s work, including the Catapult centres. The plan marks a shift from previous years, when the agency’s budget was divided into 17 priority subject areas and 12 financial instruments and programmes.

The simplification is an attempt to make it easier for businesses to approach and understand Innovate UK, and to align the agency’s work better with the remits of the UK’s seven research councils.

Ruth McKernan, Innovate UK’s chief executive, said in a statement: “We will be a simpler to understand organisation, with a clear sector focus and a more straightforward approach to competition funding.”

The core budget, which is a £14m increase compared with the previous year, will be distributed as follows: 27 per cent will go to infrastructure systems, 24 per cent to manufacturing and materials, 21 per cent to health and life sciences, and 15 per cent to emerging and enabling technologies. The remaining 13 per cent has been set aside for an open programme accepting proposals from any field.

The agency will open two calls a year for each of the five funding streams, and Innovate UK has advertised the dates of when these will open in advance, as part of an effort to help applicants plan their proposals.

Naomi Weir, assistant director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering, said: “You can definitely see some simplification in the way Innovate UK has presented its work in the report, and hopefully that will be positive for businesses trying to engage with the agency.”

However, she noted that the document covered just one year and said that the agency had not addressed many questions, including how the agency would look if it were integrated under the proposed umbrella organisation for the research councils, in line with government plans.

Innovate UK said in the delivery plan that it wanted the Catapult network—the UK’s answer to Germany’s Fraunhofer centres—to play a greater role in helping UK businesses win funding from Horizon 2020.

Mike Biddle, Innovate UK’s deputy director for innovation programmes, said that it was too early to know how such plans for increased EU funding might be affected by a possible vote for the UK to leave the EU in the June referendum. “The government is recommending that we stay in, and as a government organisation we are fully behind that,” he said.

uk & ireland

Space agency unveils latest spending plan

The UK Space Agency has confirmed that it will increase its spending to £377 million (£473m) in 2016-17, up from £355m the previous year. The figures, published in the UK Space Agency Corporate Plan 2016-17, break down the agency’s spending on international subscriptions, at £284m; national programmes, at £88m; and operating costs, at £5.4m.

Atomic energy body changes chief and research remit

The UK Atomic Energy Authority is seeking a successor to chief executive Steve Cowley, who has been at the organisation for six years. The authority is also looking to expand into areas complementary to its core function of nuclear fusion research. Plans include opening two facilities at its Culham Science Centre site, one for robotics and remote handling and one for materials research.

ESRC called on to help redeem opinion polls

The Economic and Social Research Council has been told to fund two random-probability surveys to improve the accuracy of general election opinion polls. In a report published by the National Centre for Research Methods, the ESRC looked at the poor predictions of the 2015 general election results. It called on the ESRC to fund one survey before and one after the UK’s 2020 general election.

Drug firm to invest in Irish processing centre

Pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly has said that it will spend €35 million on a facility at its Kinsale site in Ireland, to open in early 2017. The Kinsale site will spend €35 million on a facility at its Kinsale site in Ireland, to open in early 2017. The Kinsale site will become the firm’s centre of excellence for a new manufacturing process for small-molecule products. The firm has invested €650m in Kinsale in the past eight years and has about 1,000 staff based in Ireland.

Societies aim to improve use of forensics

The Royal Society of London and Royal Society of Edinburgh are to produce a series of guides with the Lord Chief Justice to promote better understanding of science in the courts. The societies said that the aim was to create ‘primers’ for the judiciary, legal teams and juries when handling scientific evidence. The first will be on DNA analysis.
Drugs firms back public research in France

An investment fund set up by the American pharmaceutical company Merck is to fund French public research organisations to study cancer therapies.

MSDAvenir will provide €5.4 million for two programmes at the Marseille Immunopôle research centre. Marseille Immunopôle is a joint venture between Aix-Marseille University; Inserm, France’s national institute for public health research; and the CNRS, the country’s largest publicly funded research organisation. Both programmes involve basic research on cancer immunotherapy.

At a press conference on 11 April, Cyril Schiever, president of MSDAvenir, said that the fund was making the move “without any expected immediate return on investment”. Both health minister Marisol Touraine and the secretary of state for research Thierry Mandon were present when the deal was signed.

A second deal that MSDAvenir signed the same day will establish a public-private partnership with Inserm. The partnership was intended to focus on programmes in areas such as personalised medicine and translational research, as well as interdisciplinary programmes in areas such as ageing, a statement said. Merck has contributed €75m to the fund, to be spent in the next three years, but further specifics have not yet been released.

Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical company Novartis, based in Switzerland, has confirmed that it will invest €100m over four years to expand its biotechnology centre in Huningue, Alsace. In a statement on 12 April, Novartis said that about 100 extra jobs will be created. The site, which specialises in the production of therapeutic antibodies, employs 430 people at present.

The Novartis investment programme was confirmed at a meeting of the strategic council for healthcare industries, the CSIS, chaired by France’s prime minister Manuel Valls. The CSIS, which brings together politicians and heads of biotech and pharmaceutical companies, presented a report at the meeting outlining 14 measures to work towards four strategic priorities for life sciences research in France.

The priorities are: improving access to innovative treatments; raising the status of production; developing clinical research capabilities and improving access to health data; and strengthening government–industry dialogue.

Greens slam scheme for small universities

A programme proposed by Germany’s federal research minister Johanna Wanka to support smaller universities and universities of applied sciences has been dismissed as a “consolation prize”. On 28 March, Wanka told the German Press Agency that federal and state governments were discussing the programme as a complement to the country’s Excellence Initiative. The Green Party described Wanka’s efforts as “tinkering aimlessly”.

Ministers at odds over headscarf ban

Thierry Mandon, France’s secretary of state for higher education, has opposed the French prime minister Manuel Valls’ suggestion to extend the ban on headscarves from schools to universities. Valls said in the newspaper Libération on 12 April that such a ban should be made. But speaking on the radio station RTL the next day, Mandon said that “there is no problem” with headscarves.

Energy-efficiency initiative launched

Germany’s federal education ministry has launched a €150-million research programme to make buildings and cities more energy efficient. The long-term goal is to decrease energy demand in buildings by 80 per cent of 2008 levels by 2050. Proposals should demonstrate potential for innovation and intelligent networking and consider sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors, the ministry said.
Finnish academy allocations in the spotlight

Social scientists and humanities academics funded by the Academy of Finland publish few papers and have low citation rates, a study seeking to demonstrate the outputs of different programmes and disciplines has said.

The study, by social psychologists Atte Oksanen of the University of Tampere and Pekka Räsänen of the University of Turku, is due to be published in the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies’ magazine Tieteessä tapahtuu in May. They looked at publication output and citation rates for more than 1,800 projects funded by the academy’s research council for culture and society between 2005 and 2015.

The study’s results show that on average academy funding generated three publications during the grant period and up to one year afterwards, which the authors concluded was a low publication rate. The study also identified a huge disparity between different disciplines: identifying history, theology and political sciences as subjects with particularly low outputs, while psychologists performed well.

The authors said that the results of the study justified a call for a debate about the academy’s funding priorities, as well as a discussion about the transparency of decisions. “It seems that the committee is recurrently funding the same researchers even though they haven’t produced many publications,” the study concluded.

Responding on 7 April, the academy disputed the conclusions of the assessment, saying that it believed the study had “serious flaws”. The academy said that Scopus—the database used for the study—failed to account for many Finnish language publications.

It also said that the study didn’t sufficiently address differences in publishing practices between humanities and social science disciplines.

Reetta Muhonen, a researcher in higher education and science studies at the University of Tampere, supported the idea that comparisons between fields might be difficult. “It is a different thing to be a top historian than a top psychologist,” she said. “Typically, different disciplines are not compared with each other but with the world average in their own field,” she said.

However, Jussi Välimaa of the Finnish institute for educational research at the University of Jyväskylä described the study as “correct and rational” within the parameters it was designed to assess. One improvement would be to look at output for a longer period, he suggested, to assess work published more than a year after a project has ended.

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Swedish industry frets over facility funding

The government of Sweden spends 1.3 billion kronor (£140 million) a year to participate in international science facilities such as the Cern particle physics laboratory in Geneva and the European Spallation Source (ESS) under construction in Lund. This money goes towards construction and operating costs. It also pays for technology contracts, under which companies from participating countries bid to design and build everything from lasers to magnets to IT infrastructure.

But industry representatives and scientists are starting to voice concern that Sweden is receiving limited orders from the facilities it backs. Writing in Ny Teknik, five business chiefs, two physicists and a science journalist said that Sweden meets 2.6 per cent of Cern’s costs but secures less than half a per cent of procurement orders annually. Swedish funding for the European Southern Observatory was 3.4 per cent of member contributions in 2014, but industrial returns were only 0.54 per cent. This, they wrote, was “not as it should be”.

One signatory was Ulrika Steiner, chief executive at the Swedish industrial liaison office Research Match. She says that part of the problem is a lack of awareness about contract opportunities, and a lack of coordination between academics and Swedish industry. “This means Sweden cannot compete,” Steiner says.

Steiner also points to a lack of money available for the risky, prototype stage of technology development for these facilities. Another signatory, Tord Ekelöf, a particle physicist at Uppsala University, echoes this concern. Ekelöf says that there is a “damaging” black hole in Sweden for projects that are not basic research—which is supported by the Swedish research council, Vetenskapsrådet—but are not developed enough to be backed by the innovation agency Vinnova.

One solution would be to fund Swedish industry’s involvement in the early development of ‘big science’ facilities, says Martin Kores, chief executive of Omnisys Instruments, an electronics company based in Gothenburg. “That’s where the fundamental technical development is made; scientists are participating in these early stages but industry is not,” he says. “In other countries, industry participates in pre-development and is better prepared for procurement.”

Sven Stafström, director-general of Vetenskapsrådet, says that having the ESS on Swedish soil could change this. The council is working on a strategy to be presented to the government in May, which will include steps to get businesses involved in the ESS. Stafström has said that he hopes Swedish industry could secure as much as kr5bn (£540m) in contracts from the facility.

Olof Hallonsten, a policy researcher at Lund University focusing on the value of big-science projects, says that policymakers must also keep industry figures in perspective when deciding whether to continue funding international facilities. “You make the investment to build up an infrastructure which will produce scientific results,” he says.

So, while industry involvement is in the spotlight in the short term, Sweden shouldn’t lose sight of the bigger picture; the scientific rewards will emerge in later decades, Hallonsten says.
Leftover Ebola funds diverted to Zika research

A White House official has said that $510 million (€452m) in unspent Ebola funding will instead be used for research on the Zika virus, which has been linked to birth defects and other problems in South America. In a statement on 6 April, Shaun Donovan, director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, criticised Congress for not approving an emergency funding request for $1.8 billion in February.

This would have supported public health efforts, mosquito control and research. Instead, the White House has taken Congress’s suggestion to use money initially intended to fund research to tackle the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2015.

Of the $510m, $47m will be spent on research at the NIH’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, its director Anthony Fauci told Science magazine. Fauci said that no money would be taken from the $238m earmarked for Ebola research given to the NIAID in 2015 when Congress approved emergency funding. That money, he said, had already been spent.

Fauci added that the NIH still wanted Congress to approve the administration’s original $1.8bn emergency funding request, which would bring about $130m to his institute. Fauci said that the NIAID had already taken money from research on other diseases to fund work on the Zika virus, and as a result malaria, flu and tuberculosis research would suffer without extra money to replenish their coffers.

Representative Hal Rogers, Republican of Kentucky and chairman of the House appropriations committee, said in a statement on 6 April: “These resources—which the agencies already have on hand—will help stop the growth of this devastating disease around the world, and prepare for and protect against outbreaks within our borders.”

Rogers said that his committee would look at the administration’s plans for the redirected funds as well as keeping an eye on the Zika outbreak to make sure that the agencies had the money they needed.

Nearly 350 Zika infections have been reported on the United States mainland—all in travellers—while the mosquito-borne virus has begun to spread locally in Puerto Rico and other US territories.

Pentagon in smart-cloth push

The Department of Defense has announced that it will contribute $75 million (€66m) to a $317m fibre-manufacturing research centre. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology will lead the collaborative centre, which the department said would involve almost 90 universities, manufacturing companies and not-for-profit organisations. In addition to the federal funding, businesses and state and local governments will contribute to the project.

Salaries up 3 per cent above inflation

The inflation-adjusted salaries of full-time professors and tenure-track researchers at universities in the United States rose nearly 3 per cent in 2015, an annual report by the American Association of University Professors has found. In the past 40 years, the numbers of such positions have decreased by 26 per cent and 50 per cent respectively, the report said. It recommended that universities revamp the tenure system and convert more part-time positions to full-time ones.

Senate lays into NIH budget plan

A Senate appropriations subcommittee has raised fresh concerns about the White House’s proposed 2017 budget for the National Institutes of Health. At a hearing on 7 April, the chairman of the subcommittee said that the proposed use of mandatory spending—which would involve raising money from the sale of state assets, such as oil from strategic reserves—would have to be repeated indefinitely to stop the NIH falling off a funding cliff.

Doctorates at record high

The National Science Foundation has said that the number of research PhDs awarded in the United States in 2014 was the highest on record. Science and engineering fields accounted for 75 per cent of the 54,070 doctorates earned in 2014, according to the NSF’s latest annual report on doctoral awards.

Chemistry reprieve at Berkeley

The University of California, Berkeley, has said it is no longer considering splitting up its college of chemistry to save money. A student-led petition against the proposal to close the college received signatures from researchers around the world, including Nobel laureates. Instead of closing the college, the university has appointed a task force to find ways that it can increase cooperation with other parts of the university.

Hawaii lab injury thought to be an accident

The University of Hawaii has said that initial investigations suggested that an explosion on 16 March, in which a researcher in a biofuels lab lost an arm, was the result of an accident. University chancellor Robert Bley-Vroman said in a statement: “All preliminary indications are that the accident was an isolated incident and not the result of a systemic problem within the building, or intentional wrongdoing.”
IPCC prepares to scrutinise effects of 1.5°C global warming

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is to meet the UN’s request for a scientific assessment of the impact of global warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius, despite uncertainty about the availability of research.

At a meeting in Nairobi this week, the IPCC confirmed that it would file a special report on the effects of global warming of 1.5°C by 2018 in response to a request from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

In December, the UNFCCC presided over a global agreement at the COP21 meeting in Paris to try to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, a significant change from the 2°C of previous agreements.

“Our last assessment showed some serious risks to coral and sea levels emerge at 1.5°C; but there wasn’t much scientific research available so we weren’t able to say very much about this,” said IPCC chairman Hoesung Lee at a press conference on 14 April. “We need to develop a much greater scientific understanding of 1.5°C.”

The report is expected to serve as the evidence base for the next round of UNFCCC talks, scheduled for 2018, to assess the power of the pledges made in the wake of the Paris conference.

Debra Roberts, a vice-chairwoman of the IPCC, said she believed that gaps in the research available would be filled in time to inform the report. “The goal around 1.5°C sent out a strong message to the scientific comm-

Race for next UN chief hots up
Eight candidates to be the next secretary-general of the UN attended hustings in New York on 13 and 14 April, following the UN’s pledge to open up the selection process. The candidates include Irina Bokova, director-general of Unesco, and Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand. Six of the eight candidates are from eastern Europe, after it was suggested that it could be the region’s turn to fill the position.

Spanish island chosen for Japanese telescopes
Japan has agreed to build four Cherenkov telescopes on La Palma, after a deal was sealed between the Canary Islands Institute of Astrophysics and the University of Tokyo’s Institute for Cosmic Ray Research. The decision has raised hopes that Spain could also host the €1.2-billion Thirty Meter Telescope, after reports that the director of the Spanish institute approached the telescope’s advisory committee after hold-ups at the planned site in Hawaii.

Spotlight on South African indigenous knowledge
South Africa’s National Research Foundation has launched a call for research on indigenous knowledge systems, inviting proposals in epistemology, astronomy, energy, women’s studies and public policy. The call was announced as parliament prepares a bill to protect and manage indigenous knowledge. The bill proposes a national office to grant researchers rights to access indigenous knowledge after consultation with communities.

Boost to Canadian aerospace research and training
Innovation organisation Mitacs has joined forces with the Consortium for Aerospace Research and Innovation in Canada to offer research and training opportunities in the aerospace industry. The partnership will offer internships at aerospace companies for postgraduates and postdoctoral researchers. It will also support research and commercialisation between universities and businesses.

University reform planned in Australia
The Australian education minister Simon Birmingham has said that cuts in higher education spending will be announced in the government’s May budget. He also said there could be changes to the country’s Higher Education Loan Programme. His comments follow a report by the Grattan Institute think tank, which recommended lowering the salary threshold for student loan repayments.
TAKING THE PEE Ahead of a European Parliament vote on 12 April on whether to call for a ban on the controversial herbicide glyphosate, which has been found to be both “probably” and “unlikely” to be carcinogenic depending on who you ask, a cross-party group of MEPs sought to raise support for a ban by testing their urine for traces of the chemical. The endeavour, which gained attention on Twitter by using the ingenious hashtag #MEPee, was ultimately unsuccessful in securing a ban, as was the group’s attempt to get European Commission president Jean Claude Juncker to fill a test tube.

A TEST OF FAITH An academic lamenting the complicated nature of the EU funding application process is by no means a rare occurrence, but particularly imaginative efforts still merit recognition. Honourable mention goes, therefore, to Rouzbeh Parsi, the director of the European Iran Research Group at Lund University in Sweden, who described the application papers as looking like a “Byzantine form of medieval theology” to those not familiar with the abstruse system.

FELINE CONFUSED According to reports, the UK Foreign Office has created a prestigious new post for an addition to its team—in the form of Palmerston the cat, who is to be deployed as chief mouse-catcher in the Whitehall offices. As the UK’s referendum on its membership of the EU looms ever closer, what are we to make of the decision to name the moggy after a foreign secretary who backed an independent Belgium for the furtherance of British interests?

STREAMING OUT THE DOOR Research commissioner Carlos Moedas asked on 4 April whether the academic publishing industry might be facing the same fate as the much-changed music industry. Critics of big publishing might want to hold their celebrations, however, as a week later the two co-founders of the Swedish music-streaming company Spotify warned it might have to look elsewhere for growth unless conditions for innovation improve in Europe. Be careful what you wish for.

A WAR OF TONGUES The power struggle between member states reached a new low on 8 April when the European Ombudsman’s office responded to a complaint about a logo used on the speaker’s desk in the European Commission’s Brussels press room. In the complainant’s view, the exclusive use of English and French in the logo was discriminatory on the basis of language. An 11-month process resulted in a predictable Ombudsman’s decision: that it was not technically possible to present the term “European Commission” in 24 languages on a television screen, because the print would be “too small for viewers to read”.

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