Surprises in European science policy

I recently participated in a daring experiment—I was a member of the selection committee for the European Commission's functional genomics projects under the 5th Framework Programme. And my experience of this experiment was quite surprising for two reasons. The first was that the EC has obviously listened to scientists' opinions and the second was that they have shown the ability to change the selection process of their research projects in an unprecedented way.

Most of the scientific community are resigned to the fact that Brussels' system of granting funding for research projects is crucially flawed. Clearly, the facts that the anonymous selection panels are appointed in a non-transparent manner, that their work is time restricted, that access to relevant documents—when sequestered in an office in Brussels—and the clarification of some assertions in the proposal with an expert colleague is not possible, feeds the popular belief that decision making at the EC is not being done in an optimal way. And those who presented this litany of concerns to the Commission seemed to make no progress; instead, those responsible for the spending of EU money still defended the system. But to be fair to the Commission, they have analysed their policies in the face of repeated criticism from the scientific community and have now reacted to it.

When the Quality of Life component of FP5 announced the creation of a new integrated project on functional genomics 2 years ago, it was sowing the seeds for a new instrument within FP6 [F. Gannon, *EMBO reports* 2(5), 363–364, 2001]. There are still differing views about the wisdom of conducting projects on such a large scale, and on how to select participants. But the Commission decided to use the functional genomics project under FP5 as a testing ground for a radically different selection process. This is indeed a surprise for many European scientists, but it seems to reflect the reality that those working in Brussels are willing to visit planet science and listen to its natives. And it shows that

they are also willing to take into consideration some of the opinions and proposals they bring back from their visit.

So what happened? The first step was to call for ideas from the scientific community about topics that fit into the very broad definition of functional genomics. Seventy-one of these relatively light outlines were considered by a group of experts who eventually chose five topics. As I was a member of this group, I should be careful about making assertions, but I think that our decisions reflect solid scientific choices. Those who prefer to see for themselves, can view a list of the scientists involved in the decision making and the outcome of our considerations as well as the rationale behind those transparent decisions at http://www.cordis.lu/life/generic/integ_proj.htm.

The next step was a call for proposals within the topics selected. The selection process was again clearly a novelty for the EC in many respects. The Commission first chose external experts—many of them from outside Europe—to comment on each proposal. Then the EC composed selection panels whose members received the applications and referee comments at their own workplaces a few weeks before the meeting at which the decisions would be taken. They were required to send preliminary scores and comments to the Commission, which, of course, meant that they had more personal responsibility and were also less likely to be influenced by others who enthusiastically supported or disliked some of the proposals. In addition, each panel member acted as a rapporteur for a small number of proposals.

The next surprise was that each group that submitted a proposal was invited to an interview by the panel—each of them with their names clearly displayed—at the meeting in Brussels. Those interviews allowed clarification of some points and enabled a better understanding of the proposals. This process was completed by a robust discussion within the panel that ultimately led to a unanimous decision.

Clearly, there is the inclination to believe that a procedure that you are personally involved in is better than others, but in this case the improvements in the selection process are truly significant. Asking external scientists for their opinions, the ability to review documents in the information-rich context of your own workplace, the transparency of having an interview with the applicants and the obligation to report preliminary scores to Brussels—all are improvements and those in the Commission who are responsible for these should be applauded. This system integrates some of the best methods that have been tried and tested in the USA at the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health and it may set a new standard to be copied by others.

This is all fine, but what are the consequences for future selection rounds? Again, there is another pleasant surprise. The most recent documents on how FP6 will be delivered propose an assessment procedure that is identical to the one outlined above. Apparently, there are still some concerns about confidentiality of applicants and reviewers. These reservations are usually vaguely attributed to industry, but I have not yet met anyone from the bioindustry who pushes this view. Perhaps this final anxiety should be abandoned as well. The next item on the agenda now has got to be those user-unfriendly application forms.

On Wednesday, February 6, 2002, Max Perutz died of cancer at the age of 87. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962 for the solution of the haemoglobin structure together with John Kendrew and he was one of the founders of EMBO in 1964. We will always warmly remember Max for his contribution to Molecular Biology and European science.

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