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News

Research supremo plans for reform in Greece

Achilleas Mitsos hopes to sharpen up Greek science.

Alison Abbott

One of Europe's leading research policy-makers, economist Achilleas Mitsos, is a leading candidate for the role of general-secretary for research in Greece's new socialist government. That appointment is expected to be decided in the next few weeks. In the run-up to the decision, Mitsos — who was director-general of the European Commission's research directorate from 2000 to 2006 — spoke to *Nature* about his ambitious plans to overhaul the research system of his home country, where money for science is scarce and cronyism is rife.



Achilleas Mitsos

What is the research situation in Greece?

Greece has one of the lowest levels of research investment in Europe. It invests less than 0.6% of its gross domestic product (GDP) in research and development — and that's declining — whereas the EU average expenditure is 1.85%. But the problems are not just financial. There is too little competition, too little evaluation of performance, and there is a lot of dead wood. Even scientists who do very little work continue to get a share of what little money there is for research. And most scientists are civil servants, so they are guaranteed employment until retirement.

Are there good research centres in Greece?

Yes. Not only some good institutes, but in almost every university and research centre there are teams that are known internationally and that are doing great research. But there are no mechanisms to reward this research and to multiply its impact. Overall the environment they have to work in is mostly bad. We have to acknowledge this and see what can be done about it.

Do you believe that the present government is serious about investing in research?

Yes, it is serious. Science is one of its stated priorities. In his inaugural speech to parliament on 16 October, prime minister George Papandreou mentioned only two figures: that spending on education will rise to 5% of GDP, and research to 2% of GDP, within the next four years. Most other areas of public expenditure will be cut. Next year will already see a small increase in the budget for research.

The government has also moved responsibility for research from the ministry of industry into the ministry of education which oversees universities. It will mean better coordination between research in universities and in other research institutes.

Different governments have tried to reform the system in the past. Why has so little changed?

A large part of the academic community has always resisted the idea of quality control and evaluation, and in the past politicians have never insisted on it. Last year, the former [centre-right New Democracy] government did actually introduce a law that tried to address some of the problems, but it was overcomplicated and unworkable. This law hasn't yet been implemented, and, as a priority, I would introduce an alternative law.

On top of this, in an attempt to cut expenditure, the previous government foresaw the moving and merging of many institutes — something that created a lot of anxiety — without having done a detailed analysis of the pros and cons (see '[Greek scientists fight research shake-up](#)').

What would this proposed law try to achieve?

It would create for the first time a granting agency for research, independent of any ministry. It would create a system for coordinating all aspects of research across different ministries with interests in research, such as health and environment, and for involving the private sector in financing industrial research. Mechanisms for evaluation would be introduced at all levels.

It would also include a plan for training researchers and ensuring a career path — a proper PhD and postdoc scheme. Greece has to look after its human capital, and make it easier for researchers to move between different research institutes and between research institutes and universities, something that is close to impossible right now.

How do you expect Greece's small industrial base to contribute to the country's research effort?

Just because it is small does not mean it should be ignored. When I was in Brussels we introduced the EU Joint Technology Initiatives in which the private sector defines the sort of research agenda it needs, and then co-funds it. This formula should now be put to work in

Greece, as a new public–private partnership based on industry's medium-term research needs.

How would you restructure the public research institutes?

All future funding should be performance-based with funds distributed according to excellence. Institutes would in future have to draw up contracts with the government. They should have to design a multi-annual research programme, which will be peer-reviewed and agreed with the government. The programme would also be evaluated at intervals, and at its completion, to make sure commitments and objectives are being fulfilled.

How would you ensure good evaluation?

Greece is a small country, and it can't expect to find evaluators and peer reviewers for all scientific areas within Greece who are both experts and free of conflict of interests. So it would have to involve foreign scientists. That means that all grant applications and research programmes will have to be written in English — I don't see a problem with that.

How would you cope with the protest that is likely to erupt at the introduction of so much evaluation?

Those who were used to receiving their money automatically because they were active in public relations or because they had indirect contacts with the government will have to face the new reality. There are enough researchers in Greece who are going to like it. I think the government will win, not lose, political capital.

This sounds like an enormous overhaul. Can so much be achieved in the four years of the government's mandate?

Yes. It should start to get the new law, and all the new structures it implies, in motion immediately. What can't be implemented 'tomorrow' should be set out in a roadmap with a clear timetable. Researchers shouldn't be left anxiously worried about what is going to happen to them.

Would your experience in Brussels as director-general of the European Union's research programmes help in the new role, if you get it?

Yes, I think it is relevant. I was lucky to have been in Brussels when European research became a respectable political aim, following the 2000 Lisbon declaration. In this declaration, EU member states recognised the central role of research for the competitiveness of the European economy and long-term economic well-being, and agreed to raise funding. I want to see Greece develop a research base as strong as that in other EU countries. I've learned enough to know that it can be done in a country like Greece.

CORRECTED: The original version of this interview wrongly stated that Achilleas Mitsos had already been appointed to the role of general-secretary for research. A decision on the appointment will be taken in the coming weeks.

Comments

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Although Dr Mitsos has not been "appointed" as a GSRT of Greece (the results of the open call to fill the post have not been published yet), his views are well respected in the RD community in Greece, mainly because of his successful tenure as the EC's DG for RD. Even if he isn't the next GSRT, I am sure the Greek government will listen to him very carefully.

As a practicing senior researcher myself, I can only agree with many of the opinions and views he mentioned in this interview and hope the system can be improved. But, Dr Mitsos must bear in mind that the entrenched "special interests" and chronic cronyism and nepotism of Greek academia (not only at universities) will be a very difficult nut to crack. Previous attempts at reforming the academic system by coercion have led to terrible disruptions, University closures, sit-ins, work-to-rule, strikes etc. For the , the previous government's dangerous, half-baked ideas (such as last July's announcement of a reform of the research infrastructure by partly destroying it, just to satisfy some cronies' secret agendas) have complicated the situation even further by making the researchers wary of any attempts to change the status quo from above. It should be clear by now that the "stick" approach will never work. It is best to use a funding carrot (over and above a basic, subsistence, level of funding) to provide real incentives and make sure that academics and the researchers are well consulted on any proposed changes and the discussion is open and frank. In this regard, compulsory evaluation of academics' achievements (as researchers in Greek RCs have accepted over the years) should be seen as a benefit opening the way towards better funding opportunities, instead of a threat.

With regard to the necessary consultations on policy and reforms, the Greek government needs also to address the issue of who represents the research community and should advise on RD policy. The current situation where the national advisory council on RD, ESET, includes just 2 (!) active researchers out of a total of over 35 members (the rest are academics but also include medical doctors, lawyers and others with almost no recent experience of research) is hardly a body that can offer advice on modern research directions!

Finally, the issue of innovation and exploitation of technologies should be treated distinctly from that of research. Innovation is the valorisation of scientific and technological results and inventions produced by researchers. End-users (both public and private) should be given clear incentives to transfer and use or commercialise such research results, for their own benefit. Of course, problem-solving ("market-pull") research can easily co-exist (and even help to fund) up-stream type of research work.

Dr George Vekinis
NCSR "Demokritos"

Posted by: **George Vekinis** | 11 Nov, 2009

As a young greek researcher working outside the country, it seems to me that current conditions within the country are not compatible with my aspirations for a fulfilling scientific career. I can only vision such achievement abroad! hopefully the suggested reforms will bring an end to mine, and many of my peers, disillusioned views of the greek R&D system. However, I must agree in part with Dr Vekinis that applying such reforms will be a tough nut to crack, as the system in greece is rotten to its core. I only hope the section of the scientific community within greece that is accepting and eager for these reforms to occur, will actively promote their introduction and proliferation.

Posted by: **Vassilios Kotiadis** | 11 Nov, 2009

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