

REPORT

Millennium Science Initiative

Mid-term external evaluation mission in Chile

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Introduction

The evaluation team, according with its Terms of Reference, has completed its evaluation on the progress of all project components. It has conducted site visits to all subprojects (3 institutes, 5 nuclei). In addition the team has held interviews with 5 teams that applied to the MSI but were unsuccessful. The evaluation focuses on the launching of the initiative, the call for proposals, the selection process and the Management Structure. We do not report on the initiation of research and training activities because a delay in the process has prevented the Institutes and Nuclei from starting their activities.

In carrying out the evaluation the Executive Director and his staff have been extremely helpful in arranging planned and unplanned visits and have responded promptly to other requirements (e.g. access to documents). We have also found that the Operational Manual provided an excellent guidance for the evaluation.

Setting the stage - Initiating the project

From our interviews with University Rectors it appears that they perceived that there was a lack of timely and thorough consultation and information to relevant bodies (e.g. Council of Rectors). Rectors now seem more supportive but critical and see problems in the future within universities.

We understood that confusion about aspects of the MSI deterred some researchers from applying

Announcement - Call for proposals

We consider that the call for proposals for the Millennium Science Initiative announced through different channels, but notably through the Web, was successful and reached most potential applicants among the scientific community. The documents that were made available were sufficiently clear and comprehensive.

Preliminary proposals

Unfortunately the initial objective of screening pre-proposals was aborted due to time constraints. Researchers, however, were allowed to submit full proposals even if they had not submitted a pre-proposal. This irregularity in the process provoked criticism and uncertainty but we believe that it did not impair the integrity of the process.

Call and selection of full proposals

All interviewed researchers (successful and unsuccessful) coincide in finding the application forms format adequate and welcoming its simplicity. Likewise researchers have reported a very positive opinion towards the Executive Secretariat established at MIDEPLAN.

With regard to the call for applications we find it unnecessary to ask for letters of reference, because it may work against young researchers.

Selection by the Programme Committee (PC)

Our understanding is that the PC distributed the responsibility of detailed assessment of each proposal to two or three members of the PC. These were asked to provide assessment sheets, commentary and marks.

The PC selected a short list of 22 proposals (9 institutes and 13 nuclei) and decided to carry out site visits to the institutes and interviews in appropriate locations for the nuclei. Interviews lasted about 3 hours for institutes and 1 hour for nuclei. The majority of PC members attended the interviews (period 22-27 October 1999).

The PC probably did its best within the time available. However, not all fields represented in the proposals had peers in their discipline in the PC. This makes the process unequal and perhaps inequitable (e.g. environmental scientists complain). Hence we strongly recommend that sufficient time be scheduled in future selection rounds to permit external peer review in accordance with international best practice.

We recommend to delete the 3 words “according to requirements” (section A2, responsibilities, i) from the Operational Manual and adoption of written peer review by external scientists. For this we recommend a majority of foreign reviewers but inclusion of some nationals (one interview revealed how one particular proposal selected for the short list did not have the necessary quality and background; this could have been detected by a national reviewer)

Programme Committee – Board of Directors (BD) interaction

In the selection process, a joint meeting of the PC and BD was held on 28 October 1999, lasting approximately 2 hours. The PC presented their recommendations to the BD. Written reports were presented only for the 3 Institutes and 5 Nuclei recommended for funding. A meeting of the BD followed immediately. The BD made decisions NOT to fund one institute recommended by the PC and to substitute another from the 6 not recommended by the PC. Similarly, the BD replaced one nucleus recommended by the PC with one of the other 8.

These decisions are not inconsistent with instructions in the Operations Manual (“As a general rule, the BD will respect the decisions based on criteria, scores, and numerical rankings approved by the PC. In cases of BD deviations from the PC’s proposition –which are expected to be rare- the BD will state its rationale for overruling the PC’s ranking and make this decision public”). However, the BD decision was taken without further discussion with the PC. This lack of consultation and perhaps even earlier flagging of these proposals in the preceding joint meeting prompted one member of the PC to resign.

The deficiencies in this process were perhaps exacerbated by the lack of a rank-ordered list from the PC for all short-listed institutes and nuclei.

We do not consider the wording of the manual, calling for making the grounds for such decisions public, as being appropriate, but believe that a written record of the rationale should have been made at the time of the meeting and communicated to the PC as a matter of courtesy.

We became aware that the discrepancies between the recommendations of the PC and the resolution of the BD became widely known, which is unacceptable.

Conflict of interest

We suggest that wording of the Operational Manual in this regard should be amended to include a more detailed description of handling the conflict of interest matter. This might

include providing a written statement as for the MECESUP (“Los integrantes de comités, así como los evaluadores externos, deberán declarar por escrito, antes de desarrollar sus funciones, con cuales IES candidatos o Núcleos o instituciones mantienen cualquier vinculación que pudiese ser juzgada como motivo de conflicto de interés, situación que los inhabilitará para participar en el proceso de evaluación de propuestas o toma de decisiones relacionadas con tales organismos”) and a requirement that the PC or BD decide on what action would be appropriate under the circumstances.

Announcement of results of selection process and feedback

The results were promptly communicated to all competitors by e-mail followed by an announcement of successful awardees on the Web. Feedback provided so far indicates that this approach was unsatisfactory in that the majority of unsuccessful applicants have so far received no information on the reasons for the rejection. The lack of feedback arose because the Secretariat does not have a complete set of evaluation sheets from the PC. The Secretariat is attempting to obtain such from individual members of the PC. Where feedback has been provided, programme directors have not been given copies of the evaluation sheets but only a summary or synthesis prepared by the Executive Director.

We received a small sample of the sheets which appear to be well designed, but many entries by PC members appear to be shallow, lacking substance, perhaps due to a lack of familiarity with specific disciplines.

Recommendation: sections 1,2 and 3 of the forms would be a good basis to be sent to external peer reviewers; and PC members could enter a summary of the peer review reports.

Specific appraisals

We have not made comments on any specific appraisals but this is appropriate in one case which is described in a confidential appendix.

Budget matters

We regret that the government of Chile has not honoured the agreement regarding the total amount of funds allocated to the project for the first year. This has had two impacts (1) the budget cut seriously compromised progress of awarded programmes and (2) the cut has been a factor, due to required additional negotiations, in producing a delay in the delivery of funds to these projects. All successful Principal Investigators have already been taking steps initiating their programmes and hence are placed in a difficult position. We strongly hope that the budget cut will be made up in the second year of operation.

We are concerned by indications that the Presidential Chairs Programme may be phased out in order to bolster Chilean funds for the MSI.

A further concern is whether the about 2% insurance premium on the grants, as required by Chilean regulations, could not be reduced or waived through negotiations as recommended by the Executive Director.

FONDECYT reaction to MSI funding

We are aware that recipients of MSI awards have received written notice from FONDECYT (Fondo Nacional de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica) questioning the compatibility of FONDECYT grants with those from MSI. Although we understand the concern of FONDECYT in terms of potential complications inherent in multiple funding we

believe that such restrictions in additional or complementary funding are not in the spirit of the MSI.

Minimum bureaucracy?

The MSI plan of greatly reducing bureaucratic impediments is made more difficult to accomplish for two reasons: (1) very detailed Chilean government regulations and (2) somewhat cumbersome Bank accounting requirements. These requirements, combined with the decision to fund individual awardees directly, has caused some successful applicants to plan the addition of an accountant to their groups, which we find not to be the best use of funds in the case of nuclei.

Establishment of the management structure.

Despite the aim to minimise bureaucracy there still are substantial bureaucratic elements, due to regulations for government agencies which directly affect and encumbers the operations of the Executive Secretariat at MIDEPLAN. We recommend that the Bank look into alternative arrangements for future initiatives. We came to this conclusion in view of international practice.

The structure of the Executive Secretariat is very slim, perhaps too slim. It seems to us advisable, for example, to have a secretary who would take minutes at Committee meetings, among other duties. Despite the obvious dedication of the present staff, we fear that they are overloaded at times.

Conclusions

The Initiative appears to have been quite successful so far as an experiment. Despite some flaws detailed in this Report most of which can be corrected in future stages, the Programme has been received very positively by all applicants with whom we spoke, whether they received and award or not. All appear to agree that the awards have gone to good groups. It is significant that most unsuccessful applicants indicated willingness to apply again in the follow up. One benefit that has already risen from the MSI is that all applicants have indicated that the availability of MSI has caused them to realise the importance of interacting with other groups, and joining with others with the aim of attaining "critical mass". Furthermore the groups have already identified young researchers that they hope to incorporate in their research teams.

The somewhat mixed reaction of representatives of the Council of Rectors and of CONICYT may be traceable to their impression of having received inadequate advance information and by concern over the relative autonomy of the management of the Initiative. We recommend a closer liaison with these groups. Scientists, on the other hand, appeared to value the novel diversity of funding sources.

The Executive Secretariat appears to have discharged its multiplicity of tasks in an efficient manner and was praised by those of whom we inquired in interviews.

We perceived concern among applicants as to future continuity of the MSI and hope that these concerns will prove unfounded.

We believe that congratulations are due to those who have worked on the difficult task of bringing this Initiative to the present stage.

Appendix (confidential)

We are aware of considerable concern expressed by some scientists to us and included in news-media coverage about Claudio Teitelboim being an applicant despite having played the major role (within Chile) in establishing this programme. This has been one of the factors that have created some initial opposition to the programme and we are told that it may have caused some scientists not to apply. We made inquiry regarding this matter and were told that Teitelboim withdrew from planning of the project at the time of negotiations.

Teitelboim has had an association as a Long-term Member since 1989 with the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, NJ, according to his CV. This raises a question as to possible conflict of interest for the chair of the PC, who is director of the Institute for Advanced Studies. But we are advised by the Executive Director that according to MSI regulations the chair of the PC acted as convenor and did not participate in making decisions on individual proposals. In addition we are told by Teitelboim and members of his team as well as by the Executive Director that the PC's site visit included probing interviews and was exceedingly thorough. Therefore we conclude that the selection process, in this case, has been carried out in a way that does not impair its integrity, and are confident that the PC's decisions are not tainted.