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More transparency for research

Image caption: The President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, meets with a delegation of the scientists that last March appealed to him for the introduction of the peer review system in the distribution of public funds for research.

The President of the Italian Republic takes up the plea of the scientific and academic world on behalf of science and raises the bidding. He asks that along with “a major availability of financial resources” there will be also an “adjustment of the structure and instruments dedicated to for the politics of research”. At the same time the President restates and guarantees his “convinced commitment” in this direction.

The call to the President to intervene, made on the 7th of March by 1,500 Italian “brains” from the columns of this paper, seems to have had an effect.

Indeed, yesterday morning a delegation of 20 scientists and researchers headed by Rino Falcone, the coordinator of the observatory on research and Paolo Bianco, Ordinary Professor for pathological anatomy at the University La Sapienza in Rome, was received at the *Quirinale*.

After the welcome of Senator Rita Levi Montalcini, who underlined the problem of our researchers escaping abroad and especially the fact that their departure is often final, other insiders gave their testimony.

One of the speakers, Pier Mannuccio Mannucci, Ordinary Professor for Internal Medicine at the Statale in Milan and president of the Group 2003, confirmed that the speeches followed two main strands: the consideration that Italy still invests too little in the knowledge economy (“though we feel pathetic to state the same things over 20 years”) and the clarification that resources are not distributed through free competition but through a direct negotiation between the public administration and researchers. In this way “it is the young who are damaged“ says the Milanese Professor.

In his report Paolo Bianco has reminded us that while it is science’s aim to “identify the routes to be developed, the innovative ideas, the quality that has to be defended and promoted”, the aim of politics should be to “make basic and fundamental strategic choices”. And here we come to the sore point, because in our country “an excess of micro-politics atomized over the national territory of science adds up without filling up the emptiness of the central strategic political choices”.

In his opinion a “law of the State that makes the procedures for funding uniform” so that “no public funding will be supplied other than by a free and transparent competition and evaluated on the basis of merit, experience and

independence” is necessary. What has been asked for is the application in Italy of “peer-review”.

These themes are taken over by Elena Cattaneo, Ordinary Professor for Pharmacology at the University of Milan, who has spent some time studying the Spanish example. In Spain an autonomous and independent agency, ANEP, has for 22 years adopted “procedures and rules to make evaluation consistent and systematically avoid any form of conflict of interest between funders, evaluators and evaluated”. It’s a system that works well according to the Spanish researchers. “We have not found a single researcher that was unsatisfied with this agency; most of them are proud of the way the public funding is distributed in Spain. Why can’t we reach the point where we are proud in a similar way too?”

In closing came the most anticipated speech - by the President of the Italian Republic. He expressed “his appreciation and respect for those who work in research, which is of crucial importance” and at the same time his “lively interest for the questions raised and for the ideas illustrated”. Giorgio Napolitano has defined research as “a priority that should be reflected in politics and in public expenditure as well as in private investment”.

He has also assured that he will continue “to solicit the attention of the authorities of the government, the institutions, the political forces and also the public opinion on the unquestionable need to make possible, to promote the growth and the competitiveness, of scientific research”.

Hopefully displaying all the *moral suasion* that his role and office give him.