portant and controversial issue and then provide the BBSRC—and the rest of Britain—with a summary of their thoughts. The volunteers, chosen to represent a cross section of society, spent two weekends this fall attending briefings on a range of issues, then conducted 2 days of public hearings with their own list of "experts." The final step, which took 12 hours overnight, was to write a report reflecting consensus on a handful of important issues.

"I wanted to assure [the public] that practicing scientists are not people who believe that knowledge is fixed," says Tom Blundell, the council's chief executive. "We welcome debate. ... As with any new technology, it's up to the public to decide [its value]."

In their report, the panelists discussed seven key issues relating to the worldwide impact of genetically modified organisms. In general, their comments reflect a positive view of the technology's potential to bring global benefits. But panelists weren't passive enthusiasts; they also pointed out areas that they think need work in the agricultural biotech industry.

The report highlights the need for "clear, meaningful labeling" of all genetically modified products. Many biotech companies are resisting compulsory labeling because they believe it only spreads fear about the products and would be interpreted the same way health warnings on cigarette packets are. The report also identifies several ways to improve the process through which the new organisms are developed, tested, and approved for use. It calls for new, international regulations, closer monitoring of field tests, and "regular and widespread monitoring of genetically engineered crops after licenses for general use have been issued." And it criticizes the current patenting procedures as "a risky and inadequate method of dealing with the issues ... [with] the goalposts being moved to the advantage of multinational companies and organizations in the private sector."

In considering the prospects for effective regulation, some panelists doubted whether legislators were up to the challenge of addressing their concerns. Panel member Florence Anderson, a nurse tutor from a London suburb, said the reaction from one politician confirmed her worst fears of what might take place in Parliament. "They'll listen, twist what you've said, and then bloody well ignore it," she huffed. Lakhbir Singh, a computer programmer from Birmingham, was more optimistic: "I'm hopeful we'll build up momentum that'll lead to things happening." In its report, the panel notes that its words "should not be the end of the exercise, but merely the beginning of a process which should lead to a better public understanding of science."

–Claire O'Brien

Claire O'Brien is a writer in Cambridge, U.K.

ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Corruption Scandal Reaches Academe

TRIESTE—The "clean hands" campaign orchestrated by Italy's anti-corruption magistrates continues to grip public imagination here—and it's now beginning to have an impact on science. Specifically under review are *concorsi*, the national competitions to appoint university professors in every discipline. Italian academics charge the competitions are not fairly run, and—backed by some recent legal decisions—they are demanding that the government clean up the system. And the government appears ready to act.

Some of these researchers made their complaints public last week during an open meeting at La Sapienza University in Rome. "This will be a war," says histologist Spiridione Garbisa of Padua University's medical faculty, who organized the meeting with Laura Calzà, a Modena physiologist. At the meeting, representatives from the Ministry for Universities and Scientific and Technological Research (MURST), the National University Council (CUN), which oversees the *concorsi*, and the academic community heard details of recent controversial decisions and debated ways to improve objectivity.

"We are now at the point where university chairs are inherited ... reward[ing] favorites and bootlickers."
—Mario Sanno

Under the *concorsi*, which are unique to Italy, vacancies for professorships are not advertised in journals. Instead, they are submitted to MURST, which every 4 or 5 years announces *concorsi* for several hundred disciplines, each with its own evaluation panel to judge applicants. The *concorsi* operate nationally, and winners are normally assigned to vacancies of their choice.

The panel's brief is to judge the "full scientific maturity" of applicants through examination of their scientific achievements, including publications. The lack of any other guidelines means that a candidate without practical experience could be appointed. According to pathologist Carlo Baroni of La Sapienza, the *concorso* system provides good results in many areas, such as the natural sciences and physics, in which Italian researchers frequently travel abroad and are familiar with other systems. "But in others, such as medicine, the situation is bad. And in the humanities it's even worse."

The irregularities in this system are now becoming public, as failed applicants become bolder at denouncing what they see as corrupt panels. In addition to charges of nepotism, critics say there is an unwritten rule to "save the local chair"—a bias in favor of local applicants over outside applicants. "While by law the *concorso* should be national, it is actually a local, family affair," says Garbisa. Mario Sanno of Chieti University's medical faculty agrees: "We are now at the point where university chairs are inherited ... a sort of exchange that rewards favorites and bootlickers."

These criticisms have been supported by some recent high-profile cases. Three *concorsi* from the 1992 round, in political economics, clinical oncology, and otorhinolaryngology, have recently been declared invalid by MURST, and their dozen or so appointments revoked. Many other *concorsi* in the same round are under investigation after irregularities were reported by the university council to the ministry. Some aggrieved candidates have begun their own legal actions, and the national press carries almost daily reports on the unfairness of the system. There is a bill now before the Parliament that would establish a commission to look into all appointments made by the *concorsi* since 1989. Its author, Senator Carla Mazzuca, predicts that the bill will become law this month.

The 70 or so delegates to the Rome meeting, from universities across the country, had no shortage of suggestions for improving the system. Their advice included mandatory consideration of the impact of an applicant's publications, requiring a specified minimum number of publications, and better vetting of panel members with inclusion of academics from abroad. There was also considerable support for a shift from centralized organization to recruitment by individual universities.

These proposals ended up this week on the desk of Stefano Podestà, Italy's minister for research and universities, until recently a university professor himself. Podestà's ministry has already expressed sympathy with the reform effort. "The system is far from straight," MURST spokesperson Roberto Alatri told *Science*.

Podestà has drawn up a bill that would reform the appointments system and academic ranks. But Podestà is reluctant to become known solely as a reformer. "I don't want to become the minister of the clean *concorso*," he has said publicly. However, as the nation continues to wash its dirty linen in public, he may soon be forced into that role.

–Susan Biggin

Susan Biggin is a writer in Trieste, Italy.