

FIRST things next

AN INTERVIEW WITH: Dr. Meir Zadok



Dr. Meir Zadok, Executive Director of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities since 1987, has been an energetic behind-the-scenes force responsible for helping initiate many of the Academy's most exciting successes: the Beijing Center, the Cairo Center, the Israel National Science Foundation, regional cooperation with Arab Academies and more. He previously filled several key posts at the Israel Council for Higher Education (1971-83), with a break to earn M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Lancaster, U.K.

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What is wrong with Israel's current, reactive funding system?

Zadok: *Nothing. Small countries should focus most of their scarce research funds on peer-reviewed proposals submitted by established groups - whatever arrives. This approach, however, only rewards existing excellence, without taking into account broader national needs. By not proactively identifying research priorities - including areas of potentially dangerous weakness - for preferential treatment, many new areas important abroad are being neglected in Israel. To date, the Academy has been able to address such problems only on a sporadic, ad hoc basis (see article on the HGP, this issue).*

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How do other countries handle this problem?

Zadok: *The U.S. has proactive, mission-oriented research programs and national institutes such as the N.I.H. The U.K. has a series of subject-specific, mission-oriented Research Councils. Israel largely lacks a national mechanism to systematically identify and close basic research gaps between itself and the rest of the international "forefront" scientific community.*

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What do you suggest?

Zadok: *The Israel Academy is trying to establish a new program for **Focal Initiatives for Research in Science and Technology (FIRST)**. It will use expert panels to proactively identify critical areas in which Israel currently has no or little expertise, but where such expertise is sorely needed. FIRST will then use its own funds to help initiate scientist training in appropriate laboratories abroad and support these trainees with research grants when they return to set up similar efforts in Israel. These would be "catalytic" grants, meant to get things started until more conventional, reactive funding mechanisms could take over.*

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What other funding problems does Israel have?

Zadok: *The existing funding system is also too risk-adverse and self-reinforcing. We must trust our young scientists more, especially those betting on innovative but untested premises. That would be the other great task of FIRST, serving as an alternative channel which could go beyond the conventionally competent and important to gamble on selected, novel attempts at major breakthroughs.*

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How would FIRST be funded?

Zadok: *We are already discussing an innovative pilot program with a major foundation that has been helpful in the past. The Israel National Science Foundation is also highly supportive, and willing to contribute at a later stage. However, to be a truly significant force on the national scene, FIRST will need major inputs from both governmental sources and the international donor community. AFBRI can help by coordinating inquiries and inputs from interested U.S. organizations.*