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News

Defending basic research in Israel

The country's science minister speaks out on proposed budget cuts.

Haim Watzman

Daniel Hershkowitz, appointed Israel's minister of science and technology in March, is a linear algebraist, but the vector along which he travelled to his current position was hardly a straight line. Last year he was plucked from his academic perch at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa to head the Habayit Hayehudi (The Jewish Home) party, a new incarnation of the political party that has traditionally represented those of Israel's Orthodox Jews who see integration into modern society as part of their creed.

Despite its name, Israel's science ministry controls only a small portion of the national science and research budget for university research. An independent body, the Israel Science Foundation, is instead the major distributor of state funds. But Hershkowitz acts as science's voice at the cabinet table. He talked to *Nature News* about his views on the country's science priorities, its research budget and the teaching of science in religious schools.

Last Friday, you took part in an emergency meeting of university administrators, public officials and politicians who have pledged to fight cuts in the higher-education and research budgets, proposed in the budget bill before government. What do you think should be done?

Investment in scientific research is investment in the future of Israel, so even when the economic situation is difficult we can't afford to allow ourselves not to look towards the future. Instead of cutting government research funds we should be doing the opposite. I am consulting with my colleagues, and I find that among the ministers there is a fundamental understanding of the importance of scientific research.

Update: Hershkowitz succeeded in part. In the budget approved by the government late on Wednesday 13 May, after this interview was conducted, his ministry's funding was increased by 50% over last year's budget, to some US\$32 million. However, an \$11 million cut in the higher-education budget - which includes most state support for basic research distributed through the Israel Science Foundation - remained in place. The budget now goes to the Knesset, Israel's parliament.

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel spends 4.71% of its gross national product on research — a number that ostensibly places Israel first among Western countries in its commitment to science. But is this figure misleading?

Unlike many other countries, where most research takes place in the universities and in research institutes, a large part of this number comes from development and applied research in Israel's military industries [allotted from the defence budget], whereas it's basic research that needs funding.

In its final report, issued two years ago, a government commission set up to propose a reform of higher-education and research policy decried the ministry of finance's position that government research funding should be directed and evaluated by economic criteria. Do you agree?

Academic freedom is the basis of academic progress. Research cannot and should not be directed by the government according to its economic value or its practical potential. Many of the greatest scientific discoveries were arrived at serendipitously. I know this is the finance ministry's dream, but other countries that have gone down this road quickly found themselves in crisis.

What are your top priorities as minister of science?

Of course, it all depends on research funds, but I think it is essential to invest in green energy and nanotechnology, and to continue to develop regional research centres in Israel's sociological and geographical peripheries. I also want to expand the Israel Space Agency, which has huge potential to make a big impact with a relatively modest investment.

You're a mathematician and an ordained rabbi, and you say you plan to continue serving, on a voluntary basis, as the official rabbi of your neighbourhood in Haifa. You've written that you see no contradiction between science and the Jewish religion. So why do most high schools in Israel's public religious school system not teach evolution?

In my humble opinion, the contention that there is a contradiction between science and religion is not a serious one. From a religious point of



Daniel Hershkowitz.

Daniel Hershkowitz / Technion - Israel Institute of Technology

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view, there is absolutely no reason not to teach evolution or other scientific theories in religious schools. I served as a member of the education ministry's steering committee for science education, and in principle there is no difference between the natural science curricula in Israel's public secular and religious schools.

But the fact is that most religious schools don't teach evolution. Would you make a public statement to the effect that evolution and the Big Bang must be taught in religious public schools?

I repeat: there is absolutely no reason not to teach evolution and other scientific theories in religious schools.

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