

PREFACE

In 1998 INCA (Consorzio Interuniversitario Nazionale la Chimica per l'Ambiente, Venezia), an Italian consortium of university research units dedicated to the field of chemistry for the environment had its quality assessed by an international Review Committee. The assessment focused both on the quality of the consortium itself and the quality of the consortium's individual research units. At the time the Review Committee recommended that INCA should consider repeating the assessment exercise at intervals of four or five years.

In 2002 INCA's management contacted me as chairman of the first Review Committee to enquire about the possibility of organising an assessment follow-up of the network. This is the reason behind the present exercise, which was performed by a Review Committee quite similar to the one that conducted the 1998 assessment four of the five initial Committee members have been present and the secretary has been replaced.

For the follow-up we have used the same guidelines of 1998 assessment, the only difference being some simplification of the administrative work for those research units already assessed in the previous exercise. For those units the assessment has concentrated on the analysis of developments taking place since 1998, while for the consortium the Review Committee paid special attention to the degree of implementation of the recommendations made in the 1998 report. Special attention was also given to the new specialist laboratories established by INCA.

The Review Committee wants to express its appreciation for the strategy developed by INCA in order to install a sound quality culture thus standing as an outstanding example of good-practice, which should be followed by other Italian networks. The Review Committee wants to draw the attention of the MIUR and the CIVR to these developments taking place at INCA and considers that they should be taken into account both for funding purposes, as well as in the decisions made for the implementation of the Italian system for evaluation of university research activities.

The Review Committee also wants to draw the attention of the relevant Italian authorities and private industries to the fact that INCA has a large pool of the best specialists in the chemistry for environment and this can be used as an important scientific source of expertise for helping to solve problems of Italian chemical industries. This large pool of expertise could be used to look for solutions of problems resulting from, for example, disused industrial plants, or created by the need to put to a different use large industrial complexes that are no longer economically viable. Expertise is also necessary for dealing with the demand for remediation of situations resulting from the long-term accumulation of industrial waste. Other areas such as environmental risk assessment or remediation technologies applied to very complex and fragile systems as is the case of the Venice lagoon are examples of problems that fall squarely within the pool of expertise of INCA's member units.

The number of units submitting self-evaluation reports was roughly the same as the number in 1998. However, as the Review Committee had now significant previous experience the exercise has proved to be somewhat less difficult, despite the size of the operation. The standard of reporting was in general satisfactory, the only exceptions being two cases that the Review Committee has decided not to assess as the quality of reporting was below acceptable standards. It is also interesting to notice that most of the units still reveal difficulties in dealing with some aspects of the guidelines, one of the obvious ones being the critical self-evaluation of the unit. As in the 1998 exercise the Review Committee decided to interview a limited number of leaders from the units thus allowing the Committee to form a more clear view of the situation by sharing its views with researchers that have a more profound knowledge of the advantages and pitfalls of the network's operation.

The Review Committee also had the opportunity of getting acquainted with some of the more recent developments of the Italian university research system, namely an increasing emphasis on relevance of research for Italian society and on efficiency and quality. One of the more important

developments is undoubtedly the establishment of a National Committee for the Evaluation of Research (CIVR) that will probably play an important role in the Italian research panorama and funding decisions.

The Review Committee is grateful for the hospitality of INCA and all its members. A special mention is made of the work developed by Professor Pietro Tundo and Professor Angelo Albini who were the main people responsible for the success of the follow-up, by steering the self-evaluation activities and providing the Committee with relevant information and by organising the visits and contact with relevant scientists. The Committee also expresses its gratitude to the staff of INCA's Roma office that has contributed to the success of the final review visit.

Finally the Review Committee wants to reemphasise the highly relevant position of INCA within the Italian university research panorama and its pioneering work is setting an example of quality culture in research. INCA deserves the recognition of the Italian research community and of the Italian authorities, namely the MIUR and the CIVR.

Matosinhos, October 28th, 2003.

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Chairman of the Review Committee