

UN science advice board axed

The UN has quietly decided to shut down its top science advice board, after a year of uncertainty about its future.

The UN's 26-member Scientific Advisory Board will be disbanded, the office of the UN secretary-general António Guterres told Research Europe. Guterres "conveys his sincere gratitude to the members of the board" and will explore possibilities for setting up a new panel that reflects his own priorities, the secretary-general's spokesman Mathias Gillmann said.

Guterres intends to establish a new panel to advise him on "frontier issues" of global concern, particularly the systemic changes caused by scientific and technological innovations, Gillmann said. He declined to provide any reasons for the decision.

Members of the board said that they had not been told about the dissolution. "This is the first I have heard about this change," said Susan Avery, a board member and president emeritus of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts.

The Scientific Advisory Board was the brainchild of former UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon. Its members were appointed in September 2013, and the board had its first meeting in Berlin in January 2014. Its purpose was to advise the UN secretary-general and agencies on how to incorporate "up-to-date and rigorous science" in policy.

Gillman said that the board was intended to advise Ban only. However, this is not mentioned in its terms of reference, which state that members serve on the panel

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for two years with the possibility of a further two-year term. This timeframe foresees the existence of the board until at least September 2017, almost a year after the end of Ban's term.

"In my understanding, this was a panel to serve the institution of the secretary-general, not just the person who was in the position at the time," said Maria Ivanova, a board member and global governance researcher at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

The board faced logistical difficulties because of its large size and the geographical dispersion of its members. Not everyone was able to attend meetings, which took place once or twice a year. In addition, the panel never fulfilled its secondary role of advising UN agencies, Ivanova said. "But all things considered, the structure has worked," she said. "Could we use the institutions that are already in place and adapt them to the agenda of the new administration?"

It took two years to set up the board after it was first suggested in January 2012. The long timeframe has led several members to raise concerns about further hiatuses if a new type of board were to be set up from scratch.

But other board members have defended Guterres's decision. "The new secretary-general rightly would like to seek a slightly different mandate for the UN Scientific Advisory Board," said Abdallah Daar, a public health researcher.

world in brief

Cuts to Brazilian science could lead to 'collapse'

Academics in Brazil have warned that cuts to the country's scientific institutions have reached dangerous levels. Institutes are running out of money and can barely pay their electricity bills, six researchers' associations said in a letter published by the Brazilian Academy of Sciences on 20 September. The groups said that successive governments' disregard for science was "threatening almost a century of hard-won conquests".

China reaches for Mars

China is on track to become the first country to explore the red planet's orbit and surface in a single mission, its government has said. China expects to launch a Mars probe by 2020 and to retrieve samples from the surface of the planet by 2030, Zhang Rongqiao, the Mars mission's chief designer, told a Beijing space forum on 20 September.

Islamic nations adopt ambitious science plan

A body representing most of the Muslim world has adopted a plan to make science a "cherished goal" of its

members. The document was adopted at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's first science and technology summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. The plan admits that despite an economic boom in some Islamic countries, "a true scientific culture is conspicuous by its absence".

G7 prioritises AI, big data and the future of work

The G7's innovation group discussed "people-centred innovation" at its first meeting in Turin, Italy, on 25 September. The Innovation 7 group—created at the G7 summit in 2016 to advise governments on new technologies—split its first meeting into three sessions. The first focused on the applications of artificial intelligence for society, the second concentrated on big data, and the third dealt with technology and the future of work.

Russia and South Korea team up on innovation

The Russian and South Korean governments have agreed to promote collaboration between their start-ups and innovative firms. The two science ministries signed a memorandum of understanding on science and technology cooperation on 18 September. The agreement lays out plans for the countries to jointly facilitate the commercialisation of scientific innovations.