

Cyprus in the 21st century

On innovation and research / The Cyprus Institute

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I have been reading with great interest for some time the articles in the press about the Cyprus Institute. In all cases, and now more than ever, I wonder if the accusers know even a little about research, academic life and its peculiarities.

I also wonder if there is even a hint of evidence to document financial improprieties, etc. However, they talk with certainty about wasteful spending and even wasteful spending of government funds.

Allow me to depart briefly from the topic and to introduce the subject of "Research and Innovation" - not as a panacea but as the only possible path for the Cyprus economy of the future.

However: do we really want to develop scientific research and if so, what do we mean and what do we know about it? I wonder if there is a (false) perception that research can be done without infrastructure, no funds, without state sponsorship, without researchers and lengthy waiting times to see the results?

But does Cyprus really need Research and Innovation? Is it the only way to improve our lost competitiveness?

We need research not only because we are the last in Europe in this field, not only in order to create new jobs, but because without research the Cyprus economy will progressively deteriorate and all the hydrocarbons of the Mediterranean will not suffice to save it.

Therefore, it was decided not long ago (in 2005) to create the Cyprus Institute (Cyl), operating on the basis of private law, and not on the base of public law (such as the various semi-governmental organisations) in order to create the nucleus of a research establishment, with regional aspirations.

Let me note that one of the most famous research establishments, the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is also established and operates on the basis of private law, but the costs are covered so far by 75% by the government (whole 740 mln for 2010 alone).

However, after 157 years of existence MIT is producing results: for instance, during the last decade with the investigations and discoveries it is responsible for indirectly creating 500,000 new jobs in the U.S. alone.



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Also, the leading European institution, the Max Planck Society (MPG), also private, is funded at an even higher proportion by the German state. (MPG's President, Prof. Peter Gruss, and a Trustee of the Cyprus Institute –will lecture at the Goethe Institute in Nicosia on January 13 - I urge you to ask him on this issue).

Research, dear friends and enemies of CyI, takes years to yield its benefits.

Finland in the great crisis of 1994 spent and continues to spend almost 5% of its GDP on research. The results of this commitment and effort, after nearly 20 years, are evident: Finland's economy ranks among the best economies in the EU.

The EU invests handsomely in research for an obvious reason: Europe cannot compete with "cheap labour countries" (India, China) in simple technologies, it can only do so with novel products, new services, innovative ideas that create jobs and profits. Incidentally, the Cyprus Institute has managed to secure out of the competitive funds over the past three years approximately 15 million Euros.

So, we created CyI in record time and now we are on the verge of closing it down!

Already, the recurrent checking of its budget by Parliament, the negative press and the various innuendos have created a negative climate, which led several notable researchers to seek employment away from the Institute – 10 people in the last 6 months!

Considering that among the staunchest supporters of the Institute, in addition to Presidents Glafcos Clerides and George Vasiliou, was the late Tassos Papadopoulos, whose acumen I do not think anyone disputes, we are surprised to see that the current president of the House Finance Committee is leading the "campaign" against the Institute.

CyI should have been investigated for what it accomplished and for what it is accomplishing. Instead, it has put on public trial for its procedures and it is audited as though it is a government Institution, where things are completely different.

WHO IS COSTAS PAPANIKOLAS?

Then again, who is Prof. Costas Papanikolas - the apple of discord in the "imperial" salary of 158,000 euros who was hired by the CyI in an open and transparent procedure in September 2007?

Dr. Costas N. Papanikolas holds a degree in Physics and a PhD from MIT. He worked in the Atomic Energy Commission of France (Saclay) and served as professor at the University of Illinois (USA) and University of Athens (Nuclear and Particle Physics). He served as a member of the National Council for Research and Technology (Greece), Director of the Laboratory of Physics of the University of Athens and Director of the Institute of Accelerating Systems and Applications of NTUA and Univ. Athens. He is a visiting professor at MIT, president of the Council of Educational Assessment and Accreditation of Cyprus (SEKAP) and was chairman of the Selection Committee of faculty members in setting up

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the Department of Natural Sciences (physics, chemistry and biology) at the Technical University of Cyprus. He is the Vice President of the Cyprus Scientific Council and a member of the National Council for Research and Innovation of the Republic. Prof. Papanicolas is a lifelong and distinguished member (fellow) of the American Physical Society, a distinction held by only 0.5% of Physics professors of U.S. universities. In October 2011 the Academia Europaea (European Academy of Sciences) made him a regular member thus being the first Cypriot to hold this honorary distinction.

From what little I know, 158,000 euros is not much for a renowned researcher and professor for a five year appointment who is not intended to receive retirement benefits like others in similar positions - (pension and those after death of their spouses, etc.)

Similarly, the "Phileleftheros" newspaper of December 24 wrote that Dr. K. Papanikolas enjoys a company car but it fails to state that the car is a 1400cc Nissan and costs 17.69 per day per day including VAT - and does not mention that officials in similar positions enjoy chauffeur driven limos).

In my view the questions which should preoccupy our MPs should be:

(a) What work is being performed by the Cyprus Institute; is it representative of a Regional Research Centre?

This question should be evaluated and assessed by international experts and not by MPs or the daily press.

(b) How did the institute succeed to enlist within its ranks, given the insignificance of Cyprus in terms of research, such prominent scientists and to secure significant funding from Brussels?

(c) Is a good or a great scholar, always the best administrator? Or, have better procedures of a public enterprise been suggested to Dr. Papanicolas and he has not followed them?

(d) Are the amounts paid from the state coffers to the Cyprus Institute from 2006 to date (27,390,000 euros - a significant part of which was used for building infrastructure) as big as others squandered elsewhere, eg Eurocypria? (Not to mention other organizations, governmental or not, which are so deep in debt that even their insolvent pension funds can bring the economy down.)

If I were to ask the members of the Finance Committee what was the salary and the benefits of the Executive President of Eurocypria, before it went bankrupt and what qualifications did he have for the position, what answer would I expect? Even so, where are the 35 million euros which Eurocypria got under "false representations to the parliament" (as the Committee observed just before everything collapsed)?

What you have to say and what did you do the about it? (What a spending party that was).

"STAGNANT" WATERS OF CAPITAL

We will not ask anything else, do not disturb the "stagnant" waters of capital.

The intervention of my dear Mr. Nicholas Papadopoulos, if it was intended as an act to help, and not what unfortunately appears to be, it should have been directed to the Trustees of the Institute and in particular to the Executive Committee. He had every opportunity to do this and to suggest, for instance, procedures that ought to be followed because the Cyprus Institute receives public support.

Sure, there are complaints by those that were dismissed, not hired, and perhaps some from the "inside" who feel aggrieved for some reason or another. Perhaps also from those who received negative evaluations and whose inability to meet the high standards of the Institute was exposed. As it is well known, the academic environment, e.g. that of our public universities, staying closer to home, is full of complaints and disgruntled employees.

But perhaps behind this story there lies something else, some other "interests" that we do have reasons to suspect.

And few words to our dear journalists: it would be good if you want to become advocates of an issue or more precisely engage in a dispute and that, for any reason, even if consciously you want to support a politician, you should document and properly inform your readers and not inject innuendos and headlines that are not consistent with reality (where did you see the "feast" on public funds in CyI?) When discussing "excessive" travel of 0.5 million how do you know that the spending was actually unnecessary for the work of the Institute? Are you aware that even the President of CyI (Prof. C. N. Papanicolas) does not travel Business Class, even though he is entitled to it?

Why do you not investigate the essence of the issue, why don't you compare it with other institutions, before writing in order to stain an institution's reputation, an institution of the calibre of The CyI?

Why did some of you choose to publish the communication of the Executive Committee of CyI piecemeal? Is this correct and ethical? Would you like to be accused without having the right to respond? Would that be fair and democratic?

I declare that I am available to debate on this issue with any politician or journalist for open debate on TV or anywhere else.

What you, gentlemen, did is harmful and damaging to Cyprus and to your profession.

Dr. Andreas Pittas is one of new Trustees of the Cyprus Institute and proud of it. He is Chairman of Medochemie and former chairman of the Employers and Industrialists Federation, OEV.

