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The appointment of the new Minister of Science and Technology augurs well for the future of science in South Africa

The appointment of Naledi Pandor is to be welcomed for two reasons. A language specialist by training, Pandor brings with her the considerable experience she gained as Minister of Education in the previous cabinet. So she is very much aware that the problems faced by science in South Africa are deeply rooted in our school system, and cannot be resolved without fundamentally reforming that system. She will also be the first incumbent since the creation of the department's antecedent, the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 15 years ago, to be a member of the ruling party. At last science and technology will have an advocate in the corridors of power, as opposed to on their margins.

The basic problem is that only a small proportion of learners leave school with university-entrance qualifications in mathematics and physical science, and most of those who do are attracted to careers into fields such as medicine, engineering, business science and accounting, which are correctly perceived as more lucrative. The result is that very few school-leavers are attracted into research careers in science, and even fewer into teaching mathematics and science at school level. Pandor and new minister for basic education Angie Motshekga, as former teachers, both know that the only way to recruit good teachers is by offering far better salaries, decent working conditions, and good facilities. But this will require a significant financial commitment—a goal which Pandor will hopefully work together with Motshekga to achieve.

Pandor's predecessor, Mosibudi Mangena, is to be commended for his success in increasing spending on research and development, which has now risen to 0.92% of GDP. But university-based researchers, of whom South Africa has a solid and productive core, have benefited little from this increase in spending, with the exception of the small minority who have been fortunate enough to be located within centres of excellence or who have been awarded research chairs. Instead, the department has embarked on a number of projects in areas in which South Africa has no natural advantage and that are being promoted in most countries—such as bioinformatics and biotechnology—or where we have very little expertise, such as radio-astronomy. The department's most laudable project, aimed at enhancing our skills base and associated competitive ability—a five-fold expansion of the country's output of doctoral students by 2018—appears to be faltering for lack of funds (see pages 83–84 of this issue). With the weight of their party behind them, Pandor, together with Dr Blade Nzimande, the new Minister for Higher Education, should give this matter their urgent attention.

At present, the department has budgetary responsibility only for the Human Sciences Research Council, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, and the National Research Foundation—the Agriculture Research Council, the Medical Research Council, and the Council for Minerals Technology all fall under their respective ministries. This hinders the proper coordination of research programmes—placing all the research councils under the Ministry of Science and Technology would be a bold step which should catalyse better integration of the nation's research efforts.

In the last 15 years the ministry has never really realised its potential in terms of placing the development of science and technology at the centre of government policies. Perhaps the major challenge facing the new minister is to position the department to play this role, rather than just acting as a conduit for funds in its own narrow sphere. One step that might aid this process would be the appointment of a chief scientist to the government to assist in this task. ❑