

NEWS IN FOCUS

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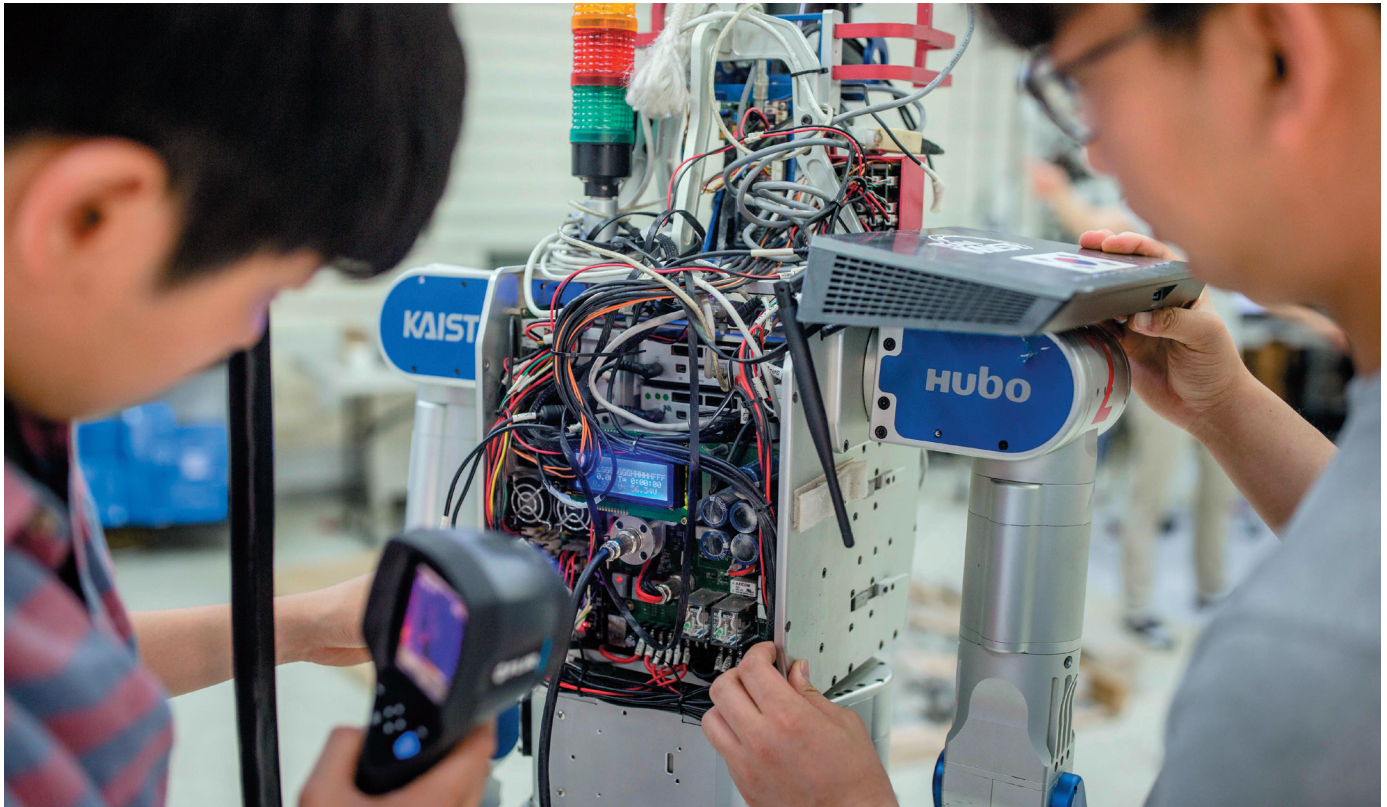
CLIMATE Southern Ocean spotted burping carbon dioxide on the sly **p.311**

CHINA Penalties for research misconduct go beyond academic career **p.312**



NATURE'S 10 Ten people who mattered in science in 2018 **p.325**

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Leaders at South Korea's top technical university, KAIST, have voted to delay a decision to suspend its president.

SOUTH KOREA

Outcry over treatment of university president

Government alleges Shin Sung-Chul misused funds, but scientists see a political purge.

BY MARK ZASTROW

Researchers in South Korea have criticized the nation's science ministry for its handling of an investigation into the president of the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) in Daejeon.

The ministry alleges that Shin Sung-Chul misused public funds in his previous job by making payments to Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL) in California, accusations that Shin denies. The payments

were part of a deal in which scientists at South Korean universities were guaranteed access to one of LBNL's imaging facilities, an X-ray microscopy beamline. The ministry has referred the allegations to prosecutors, and requested that KAIST's board of trustees suspend Shin — a decision that the board deferred when it met on 14 December.

Many scientists suspect that the allegations are part of a politically motivated attempt to remove Shin, who was hired under the administration of South Korea's previous president.

The call to suspend him seems to have been rushed and is based on insufficient evidence, they say. Researchers also say that the ministry has misconstrued a common practice in which institutions pay fees to use equipment at international facilities.

The ministry says that the payments — 2.2 billion won (US\$1.9 million) in total — were illegal because they were not part of a 2012 agreement between LBNL and the Daegu Gyeongbuk Institute of Science and Technology (DGIST), a publicly ▶

► funded institute where Shin was president from 2011 to 2017 before taking over the presidency of KAIST.

The ministry's audit team uncovered the alleged misuse, and the South Korean broadcaster SBS first publicized the allegations on 25 November. The ministry says that some of the 2.2 billion won was paid to one individual, a former student of Shin's, and that this could constitute embezzlement.

Shin refutes the allegations. In an e-mail from KAIST, sent in response to questions from *Nature's* news team, Shin said that neither he nor DGIST was involved in any illegal activities, misconduct or embezzlement regarding LBNL, which is owned by the US Department of Energy (DOE). "The collaboration contract between two institutions was fully approved through all proper rules and regulations of the DOE and LBNL's contracting processes," he said.

As president of DGIST, Shin brokered an agreement with LBNL in 2012 that gave his institute's researchers the chance to work with one of the world's most respected physics labs. The collaboration received ten weeks of beam time, which DGIST did not pay for. The agreement expanded in 2014, and again two years later, securing DGIST half of all available time on one of LBNL's X-ray microscopy beamlines,

which its researchers used to explore nanomaterials. As part of the arrangement, DGIST paid an annual facility fee.

On 10 December, LBNL sent a letter to the ministry — seen by *Nature* — supporting Shin's version of events. It says that the agreement with DGIST was a customary approach to conducting collaborative research with international partners and that the reported allegations "contain significant errors in fact and in assumptions". The letter also said that the collaboration required significant instrument time beyond the scope of a standard short-term project, and that the payments supported the operation and staffing costs of running the beamline.

A petition in support of Shin, organized by the KAIST physics department — where Shin worked from 1989 to 2011 — had collected more than 830 signatures from researchers at South Korean institutions by 14 December.

The petition says that calls to suspend Shin lack due process because they are based on an ongoing investigation and unproven accusations. "There simply is not enough evidence

"There simply is not enough evidence to justify suspending him from his duties."

to justify suspending him from his duties," the petition states. The ministry has "treated him like a criminal", says one of the petition organizers, who requested anonymity because they fear retaliation from the government for speaking out.

The science ministry said in two statements that the request for Shin's suspension was carried out in accordance with the ministry's authority to regulate public institutions.

The ministry has also accused Shin, two other DGIST professors and Shin's former student — now a staff scientist at LBNL — of misconduct. It alleges that they did not follow the correct process when granting the former student an adjunct position at DGIST during Shin's presidency, and referred them to prosecutors on 28 November.

Shin told *Nature* that he did not offer the student favourable treatment. In a press conference on 4 December, he also said he had had nothing to do with determining their salary or hiring at LBNL or DGIST.

In its letter, LBNL says its researcher is an expert in soft X-ray microscopy; that it had followed its own hiring and salary disbursement procedures; and that no DGIST funds had been sent directly to the researcher.

The ministry did not respond to *Nature's* questions about LBNL's letter or the petition. ■

ITALY

Scientists slam donation to question vaccine safety

Italian National Order of Biologists donated €10,000 for research into vaccine ingredients.

BY GIORGIA GUGLIELMI

Some scientists in Italy are up in arms over a donation from the organization that oversees the nation's professional biology qualification to an advocacy group that opposes mandatory childhood vaccination.

The news comes as Italian politicians debate whether to continue with the mandatory vaccination policy, which was introduced in 2017 and requires parents to provide proof of ten routine vaccinations when enrolling their children in nurseries and preschools.

The advocacy group, Corvelva, announced that it had received €10,000 (US\$11,350) from the National Order of Biologists (ONB) on 26 October says that it plans to use the money for research that investigates the safety and efficacy of commonly used vaccines. Corvelva says that previous studies it has funded, which have not yet been published in a peer-reviewed

journal, indicate that some vaccines contain impurities, or lack the active ingredients they are claimed to contain.

ONB president Vincenzo D'Anna told *Nature* in an e-mail that there is a need for truly independent vaccine research because, in his opinion, work conducted in public laboratories and at universities is usually influenced or funded by companies that produce vaccines. "The goal is to contribute to complete the biological and chemical analyses on vaccines," he said in the e-mail interview, part of which the ONB has published in its Bulletin.

But many scientists dismiss the need for the additional research — on the grounds that vaccines are already rigorously tested — and are

flummoxed by the ONB's donation.

"There's solid evidence that vaccines work and are safe," says virologist Giorgio Palù at the University of Padova, who is president of the European and Italian societies for virology.

Membership in the ONB confers certification for jobs in the biological sciences in Italy. The order has about 50,000 members who each pay an annual membership fee of €120.

The large-scale, expensive studies that test vaccines' efficacy and monitor for adverse side effects are regulated and supervised by national and international health agencies and are "far more accurate than tests that could be done with €10,000", says Gennaro Ciliberto, a molecular biologist at the University of Catanzaro Magna Graecia and president of the Italian Federation for the Life Sciences, which includes 14 scientific societies.

Once vaccines are approved, these agencies continue to monitor them by testing batches

"Studies that monitor reactions 'cannot exclude the possibility that vaccines are toxic.'"