



Italian Society of Mineralogy and Petrology

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER



Giuseppe Cruciani

As the new SIMP president for 2012–2013, it is my pleasure, on behalf of SIMP, to express my gratitude to our outgoing president, Stefano Poli. Thanks to his remarkable vision, and with the support of the other Council members, many significant goals were accomplished in 2010–2011. These included innovations in society management and governance, the establishment of links with other learned societies, outreach activities, and other important initiatives. In line with an established practice of SIMP Council, we will be calling on the wealth

of experience and expertise of Stefano, as past-president, to guide us during the next two years.

The year 2011 marked the beginning of dramatic changes affecting academia and the scientific community in Italy. Government actions taken in 2009–2010 will result in a 19% cut in the 2012 university budget, worsening Italy's 1.1% share of GDP spending in R&D in 2011 (compared with 1.7% in Europe, 2.3% in Germany, and 2.7% in the US). The 2011–2019 forecast points to a 30% contraction of the academic body, which raises serious concerns about maintaining the critical mass necessary for the survival of our disciplines. As a drastic effect of law no. 240/2010 (the so-called "Gelmini law"), which rebuilt university governance, only 6 out of 31 pre-existing departments of Earth sciences will survive; the others will be forced to merge with other departments in diverse fields, just to comply with a minimum threshold, which is the same for differently populated academic areas. This stands as a missed chance to redesign the academic framework in Italy based on an informed rationale instead of on raw numbers.

In a context of economic recession like the one we are facing in Italy (and Europe), very little public and political support for fundamental science is expected. The only national public-funding competitions in Italy, PRIN and FIRB, have been given new strict rules. Project selection will strongly favour very large groupings and applied research on topics listed among the Horizons 2020 EC programme (cultural heritage, so relevant in Italy, is not even included!). This is a daunting perspective for most Earth and mineral scientists, in spite of the fact that the 2005–2009 survey by Scival Spotlight revealed that Earth and mineral sciences are ranked among the 12 areas of excellence in Italy, based on the criteria of productivity, internationality, interdisciplinarity, and the likelihood of knowledge transfer (Dello Iacovo 2011). This international success has recently been chronicled by the connection of Italian scientists to the Nobel Prize for the discovery of quasicrystals (Bindi and Steinhardt 2012). A revitalization of higher education in Earth sciences is further testified by a 25% increase in the number of first-year students in 2010–2011, after persistent decreases since 2003–2004.

I wish to state that the Italian Society of Mineralogy and Petrology will remain committed to its fundamental mission as defined in 1940 by the founding members, namely, "to promote, organize, and develop advancing knowledge in the different fields of mineral sciences, in their broadest sense." Activities pursued by SIMP will be devoted, as ever, to organizing meetings, sponsoring PhD courses, allocating grants and awards, fundraising, participating in scientific journals and magazines (*European Journal of Mineralogy* and *Elements*), establishing and strengthening national and international relationships with allied societies, and making the public, policy makers, and stakeholders more aware of the value of our science.

The SIMP 2012 annual meeting will be held during the upcoming European Mineralogical Conference (EMC2012) in Frankfurt. SIMP is actively endorsing the launch of a tradition for a joint European conference of mineral sciences in their broadest sense. Dedicated travel grants from the Geoitalia Foundation will be awarded by SIMP Council to facilitate the participation of students. The next outstanding event, with SIMP strongly supporting the local organization chaired by Massimo Coltorti, is the 2013 Goldschmidt Conference, to be held in Florence. Other recent initiatives include the launching of a new prize dedicated to the late Enzo Michele Piccirillo, made possible by a generous donation from a SIMP member. It will support young Italian researchers eager to improve their scientific skills in other countries.

The commitment of SIMP to strengthen links with allied societies in crystallography, geochemistry, and volcanology, and with the Italian Geological Society, will continue in an effort to provide our community with more impact in the political arena, while maintaining the diversity of our disciplines.

Just as has been reported by other members of the *Elements* family, mineralogy and mineral sciences in the broadest sense are facing financial austerity and an identity crisis in both Italy and Europe. This situation requires an immediate reaction from individuals and scientific societies. Great potential still exists to show that our disciplines can contribute to societal issues, including the environment, natural hazards, renewable energies, CO₂ capture and sequestration, the understanding and modeling of the deep-Earth engine, the design of new mineral-inspired materials, the preservation of cultural heritage, raw materials, the interplay of the geo- and biospheres, and the like. If our scientific community does not provide substantial input on these issues, who will? So let's all join our efforts, and in doing so, allow our vision of the future to be more optimistic!

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REFERENCES

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