

# One for all — and all for one

Hubert Markl, president of Germany's Max Planck Society, wants to make the organization work as a coherent whole. As the society prepared for its annual meeting in Munich, he explained his vision to Alison Abbott.

Four years into his six-year term as head of the Max Planck Society (MPS), zoologist Hubert Markl is shaping his legacy. If all goes to plan, his presidency will be remembered for turning the MPS into a more dynamic organization, able to react quickly to the opportunities offered by new avenues in research. And last week's publication of *Research Perspectives 2000+*, a blueprint for the society's future, may well be seen as the turning point.

The document itself is unremarkable — it identifies probable future research directions, listing them under broad themes such as "From genes to organisms". But it is the process that produced *Research Perspectives 2000+* that Markl sees as the catalyst for change. In particular, he believes it will now be easier to close existing Max Planck Institutes so that new ones can be born — a perennial problem for MPS presidents wanting the flexibility to respond to new research opportunities.

## Closing time

No one questions the society's reputation for scientific excellence — it has nurtured 15 Nobel prizewinners since the Second World War. But if the MPS has a problem, it is a lack of flexibility. Arguably, both the society's strengths and its weaknesses result from the established principle that Max Planck Institutes are built around their directors. The selection of a new director is a long and carefully considered process. But once installed, the director is left to pursue whatever research he or she thinks fit.

When a director retires, the MPS reviews the work of the institute concerned and, if appropriate, appoints a new director with different research interests. The institute may then be closed and reincarnated in another guise. But in practice, as research directors come up to retirement, they nearly always fight against closure as they feel it would undermine their lifetime's achievement. Over the years, the protests have been sufficient to frustrate the society's attempts to remodel several of its institutes.

As an expert in animal behaviour, Markl knows all about the strength of the biological urge to reproduce. But from experience with retiring Max Planck directors, he has noticed that "the cultural reproductive urge is stronger". Markl had to close down six institutes and more than 20 departments within individual institutes in western Germany to



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help finance the expansion eastwards that followed German unification. "It is not easy to make changes," he says. "There were many who considered me absolutely heartless."

Markl believes the consultative process used to draft *Research Perspectives 2000+* will make such changes easier. Each of the 78 Max Planck Institutes was asked to submit its plans for the future. These were then debated widely and synthesized into the final document by a committee drawn from the research directors who sit on the society's governing senate. For the first time, the MPS's directors were forced to think strategically as a group, regardless of disciplinary boundaries.

The result, says Markl, is a vision for the future that everyone, in theory, has signed up to — making it difficult to defend the retention of institutes that have not presented convincing plans. The process will be repeated every few years, to keep the society's ideas fresh. "This new instrument gives everyone the chance to make their point about how they see their future," says Markl.

Markl has also introduced a parallel system of evaluating entire disciplines, in which

MPS research at relevant institutes is compared with developments elsewhere in the world. The first evaluation, on molecular neuroscience, has just been completed.

## Towards a flexible future

*Research Perspectives 2000+* was presented to the research directors last week, at the society's annual meeting. Although most have yet to digest its contents, the document has been received warmly by senior figures outside the MPS. Josef Lange, state secretary for science, research and culture in the city of Berlin, thinks it will also influence Germany's universities, particularly if another of Markl's innovations — a new system of graduate research schools — works as planned. Nine MPS International Research Schools, offering PhD training in conjunction with universities, will open this autumn. Markl believes they will stimulate collaboration between the MPS and the university sector, which is not as well developed as many policymakers would like. He hopes that there will be 30 of these schools within five years.

But has Markl really found a system that will give the MPS the flexibility to close institutes without getting bogged down in heart-wrenching protests? Lange is unsure. "It is a big task to come to a system of establishing and closing institutes," he says. The answer should become clear over the next few years, as a large number of directors who were hired during the society's expansion in the 1960s and early 1970s reach retirement age. ■

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