

EU helps to save science jobs in Berlin

[MUNICH] Sixty east Berlin scientists who had kept their jobs thanks to now-defunct 'rescue' funds following the reunification of Germany have been saved from unemployment once again by a new scheme supported by the European Union (EU).

The DM18.6-million (US\$10.6-million) scheme, which began last week, will retrain the scientists, most of them at the Max Delbrück Centre for Molecular Medicine (MDC). The money is from the European Social Fund, part of the EU's 'structural funds' which subsidize its poorer regions.

If successful, the scheme could become a model for unemployed researchers in other poor regions in east Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Brandenburg, for example, is already preparing a similar proposal.

After reunification in 1990, many of the estimated 24,000 scientists from the former East Germany had difficulty finding jobs in the new research organizations that were introduced, modelled on those of West Germany. Almost 75 per cent lost their jobs.

For a few years, several thousand of the most highly qualified scientists stayed in work thanks to special support programmes, such as the Wissenschaftler-Integrations-Programm (WIP) and the Verstärkungsfonds. But these ran out at the end of last year, and the German government has refused to make further money available (see *Nature* 378, 656; 1995). In Berlin alone, over 2,000 scientists joined the dole queues in January.

One of the problems for east German scientists has been that their lack of experience in modern scientific techniques has made it difficult for them to compete for grant money with those from the west, according to Marion Bimmler of the MDC's personnel department.

"Neither German programmes, nor the EU's Framework research programmes, offer adequate retraining opportunities for researchers with a slightly outdated scientific background," she says. Two years ago, she decided to try to secure money from the European Social Fund — which, among other objectives, supports retraining of the unemployed — for the east German scientists in her institute.

But these funds are normally intended for retraining those with few, if any, qualifications. To make qualified researchers eligible, Berlin had to adapt its three-year plan for spending its current allocation of money from the social funds, and then gain the approval of Germany's 15 other states.

Final approval now depends on the European Commission being prepared to modify its normal rules, although it is widely expected that it will do so. A formal decision, which the MDC is confident will be in its favour, is due in the next few weeks.

"We are very enthusiastic about the idea of using social funds in this way," says a commission official, "particularly because the part of the social funds which we have earmarked for spending on research activities is consistently being underspent, even though we consider research to be a central point in regional development."

The commission is anxious that social funds used to retrain researchers should have a long-term impact for the region, rather than being just a short-term welfare act. So it will be closely watching the experiment in Berlin to ensure that scientists find appropriate jobs after retraining. "In the long term this would help to establish industrial R&D in east Germany," says the official. But he warns that the social funds must not simply become a covert means of paying researchers' salaries.

The 60 Berlin researchers will work on reduced salaries during the three years. Unlike normal social funds training programmes, which are full-time, the training of the east German scientists in the theory and practice of molecular biology will be limited to eight hours a week. During the rest of the

time they will be active members of MDC research groups. "Being given the chance to improve their scientific competence will make it easier for the scientists to be more successful in applying for grant money afterwards," says Bimmler.

Bimmler's hopes of placing all 160 newly out-of-work MDC scientists on this scheme could not be realized, but those who will benefit are relieved and optimistic. For example, Karla Köpke, a 46-year-old biologist who was out of work for a year after reunification, and who has since survived on two WIP grants at the Humboldt University, will be trained in human genetics at the MDC, joining the Human Genome Project research group.

Having worked as a pharmacologist for 20 years in the former East Germany, then in protein design and biometrics at the Humboldt, Köpke has no experience in human genetics or modern molecular biological techniques. "Given my age and background", she says, "I have no chance of finding a job on the regular market." After retraining she hopes to win grants to allow her to continue working at the MDC.

Quirin Schiermeier

Tariff waiver would aid instrument imports

[WASHINGTON] Draft legislation has been introduced into the US Congress to remove a longstanding impediment to international collaboration by lifting tariff restrictions on pieces of large scientific instruments brought into the United States from other countries.

The bill was introduced last month by James Sensenbrenner (Republican, Wisconsin), chairman of the US House of Representatives Science Committee.

Projects affected include one of two Gemini telescopes now under construction in Hawaii. The US Customs Service originally ruled that a mirror, manufactured in the United States but sent to France for polishing, could not re-enter the country without duty being paid. But Congress passed legislation last year to waive the tariff, saving Gemini \$1.8 million, according to Richard Malow of the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy, the consortium managing the project.

Similar problems have faced the Large Binocular Telescope project in Arizona and the Department of Energy's Continuous Electron Beam Accelerator Facility in Newport News, Virginia.

Sensenbrenner's bill is designed to amend the language of the Florence Agreement governing the import of items of educational, scientific or cultural benefit. Duty-free status would extend not just to whole instruments but also to components, when "the instrument or apparatus, due to



Sensenbrenner: lowering costs.

its size and complexity, cannot be imported in its assembled state". The Florence Agreement dates back to the 1960s. According to one Customs Service official, "They didn't foresee these huge instruments you couldn't possibly bring in whole."

The current regulation clearly exempts components from duty-free status, so the only way to solve the problem is with new legislation. But the Commerce Department would still have to rule that there is no US equivalent for the part being imported.

Within days of introducing the bill, Sensenbrenner received a congratulatory letter from Burton Richter, director of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in California, saying the legislation would help smooth collaboration on the centre's B-factory particle collider. International partners are picking up some 40 per cent of the cost of the instrument. "They, and we, have been very worried about the possibility that tariffs will be assessed on their contribution, which would raise the cost of the detector significantly," Richter wrote.

The bill has been referred to the House Ways and Means Committee for consideration, and Malow expects it eventually to pass.

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