

Hubert Markl

(1938–2015)

Biologist who steered German research organizations through reunification.

Hubert Markl had an extraordinary impact on research in Germany before, and crucially during, the turbulent process of reunification. An evolutionary biologist and behavioural scientist, he was also a writer, public intellectual and policy-maker. His stints as president of the German Research Foundation (1986–91), the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (1993–95), and the Max Planck Society (1996–2002) shaped the entire German and European research systems.

Markl died on 8 January, aged 76. He was born in Regensburg, southern Germany, in 1938. Although he had an early interest in the humanities, Markl studied biology, chemistry and geography at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. His teachers included luminaries such as the behavioural scientists Martin Lindauer, Konrad Lorenz and Karl von Frisch and the zoologist Hansjochem Autrum. He got his doctorate in zoology aged 24.

During the early 1960s, Markl held several research posts in the United States: at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Rockefeller University in New York and the Tropical Research Station of the New York Zoological Society (where colleagues called him Jim). He returned to Germany, to the Goethe University Frankfurt. In 1967, he submitted a thesis on the communication behaviour of social insects to acquire his lecturing qualification.

In 1968, he became professor and director of the zoological institute at Darmstadt University of Technology. Markl recalled this appointment as the most crucial and successful of his life. It gave him the freedom to pursue research interests from evolutionary biology and behavioural ecology to sensory physiology and conservation. In 1974, Markl moved to the University of Konstanz, founded eight years before to revive the Humboldtian ideal of research-based teaching. He became one of the leading figures of 'Little Harvard on Lake Constance'.

That year, Markl was also elected senator of the German Research Foundation, the nation's main public funding agency for basic research. After a six-year stretch as vice-president, he became its youngest ever president in 1986. Of his many achievements there, three stand out: his implementation of long-term grants; the introduction of a structured programme for doctoral training and research;



and the opening up of funding opportunities for East German researchers well before unification was agreed on in the autumn of 1990.

Next, Markl became deeply involved in unifying Germany's two higher-education and research systems that had headed in different directions after the Second World War. In West Germany, teaching and research were combined in a federal system where each state had a lot of independence. The East had adopted the Soviet model of universities tooled mainly for teaching and specialist institutes focused on research. In 1993, Markl's task as founding president of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities was to attract the best researchers from the former East and West to become active members of a unified academy. He forged joint working groups through which the best minds came to trust each other.

Markl faced much bigger challenges when he took the helm of Germany's Max Planck Society in 1996. He was the first and so far only president recruited from outside the organization. The society had planned 18 new institutes in eastern Germany. But owing to the government's severe underestimation of the costs of unification, the organization did not get the funds it needed. Hard decisions were required.

It was clear to Markl that savings had to be made at existing institutes in the west, and more resources transferred to the new institutes in the east. This controversial policy

quickly earned him a tough reputation, particularly when he decided to close underperforming and outmoded departments, as well as entire Max Planck institutes, such as the one for history in Göttingen and for cell biology at Ladenburg, near Heidelberg. The closures were resisted by the affected state governments. With his sharp intellect and his talent for communication, Markl prevailed and rejuvenated the Max Planck Society.

During his term, 153 new directors out of the society's 266 were appointed. As a result of a root-and-branch evaluation of the society, Markl improved the institutes' links with neighbouring universities, such as Göttingen, Munich and Heidelberg. In 2000, he started the International Max Planck Research Schools programme. The scheme has attracted several thousand young scholars from abroad to study in Germany and continues to build bridges across institutional boundaries. Many Max Planck directors have become closely involved in training doctoral students as well as in the teaching and research activities at the respective German partner universities.

Markl spoke truth to power on topics including genetic engineering, cloning and stem-cell research. He was also outspoken against xenophobia and in favour of intercultural learning and the right to medically assisted suicide.

In 1997, he initiated an independent study of the history of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (the predecessor of the Max Planck Society from 1911 to 1946) during the Third Reich. In 2001, as a result of this research, he publicly acknowledged the guilt of its members participating in the expulsion of Jewish colleagues and other Nazi atrocities, and apologized to survivors at a commemoration ceremony.

"Responsibility does not rest with science as such," Markl repeatedly told his students, "it is always the individual scientist." He will long be remembered as a visionary, a brilliant intellectual and courageous leader. Without him, scholarship and science in Germany and beyond would not be what they are today. ■

*Wilhelm Krull is secretary-general of the Volkswagen Foundation in Hanover, Germany. He frequently collaborated with Hubert Markl over 30 years.
e-mail: krull@volkswagenstiftung.de*