

Austrian universities come under scrutiny...

Munich. Austria's biomedical research community has come in for harsh criticism in a report by an international review committee, commissioned by the Austrian Biochemical Society and presented to the ministry of science and research last week.

The report says that the standard of biomedical research in Austria is, on average, well below that of other European countries of similar size and wealth, such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Switzerland. It puts most of the blame on Austria's universities, where most such research is carried out and which can give tenure to scientists without requiring proof of research competence.

The review committee, chaired by Fritz Paltauf, a biochemist at the Technical University in Graz, was organized by the European Molecular Biology Organization. It says that while several centres carry out "excellent work", the scientific output of many research groups is poor, and criticizes an apparent lack of concern in the academic world that such groups are still funded.

The prime cause of this poor performance, according to the report, is Austria's "misguided" policy for academic appointments, which has had a "devastating" effect on many institutes. Tenured positions are too often made on non-scientific criteria such as age. The review panel claims this blocks opportunities for ambitious young researchers, already hampered by a law preventing temporary appointments for professors and assistant professors.

University traditions also leave the research community split up into groups that are too small to compete international-



ly. The panel does not criticize the level of research funding. But it points out that the money tends to be spread among too many groups rather than being concentrated on the stronger ones.

A top priority, says the review panel, is that universities should be required to evaluate the research competence of scientists being offered tenure. It also recommends that grant applications be assessed more

critically, with larger grants given to strong research groups.

The Austrian Biochemical Society says it "largely agrees" with the report's conclusions, but blames the absence of non-university research institutes in Austria, in addition to university procedures, for its failings in biomedical research.

But the problems identified by the review panel are not confined to biomedical research. Austria's 18 universities, traditionally tightly controlled by the science and research ministry in Vienna, are attempting to implement a new law, passed in 1993, that gives them extensive administrative and financial autonomy.

The law requires that procedures be set up to ensure that successful researchers are allocated an appropriate proportion of university resources. But the implementation of these procedures remains slow in the face of considerable resistance from the universities. Meanwhile, a further draft law, drawn up by the research ministry to allow temporary positions for professors, continues to meet political opposition, particularly from trades unions.

Helmut Ruis, a professor of biochemistry

at the University of Vienna's Biozentrum who has long argued for a more selective distribution of research money and is a driving force behind the setting up of the review panel, says he hopes that its conclusions will help to convince the government it must address the university system's shortcomings.

Outside the universities, however, there are some encouraging signs of change. Most public funds for basic research are distributed through the national agency, the *Fonds zur der Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung* (FWF). This has long been criticized as operating on the 'Gießkanne' or 'sprinkler' principle, with research money distributed to weak and strong alike in 'drops' too small to be effective.

This year, however, the FWF has raised its rejection rate for grant applications from 25 per cent to 40 per cent, and the length of grants from two to three years. The agency has also just launched a programme giving young scientists five years of generous funding, averaging ÖS2.5 million (US\$240,000) per year, to set up independent their own research groups. Ten scientists will be funded in this way each year. **Alison Abbott**

... as Japan backs fixed-term posts

Tokyo. In a significant break with tradition, Japan appears poised to take its first tentative step towards introducing limited-term appointments — rather than lifetime employment — for university staff.

The change has been recommended in the interim report of a committee set up by the University Council, an advisory body to the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho). It is aimed at encouraging better research and teaching, and could eventually lead to a radical reform of the whole university system.

Winning acceptance of the idea of limited term appointments "took a long time to achieve", says Akito Arima, vice-president of the council. Arima is president of the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (RIKEN), as well as a former president of Tokyo University, and headed the council committee responsible for writing the interim report.

Nevertheless, Arima admits that he wanted "a more decisive decision" at this stage on the reform of employment practices, and says he still sees a long road ahead before the changes recommended in the report — to be followed by a more substantial final report in about a year — are implemented.

Reflecting conflicting views in the council itself, the report suggests that individual universities should be allowed to decide whether to introduce limited-term appointments, to set their duration and to specify

the conditions under which they can be renewed. As such, the recommendations are "very weak", admits Arima, who has been campaigning vigorously for years for reform of Japan's university system.

Along with limited-term appointments, the council recommends a system of assessing university staff that would operate before a contract is renewed. The report gives no details of how such assessments should be carried out, or how the results should be applied. But it would include an assessment both of teaching — possibly by students — and of research output.

Introducing limited-term appointments will make it necessary to rewrite Japan's labour laws. These stipulate that government employees, including national university staff, can be employed only on a permanent basis. "My main aim is to change the law," says Arima. He points out that a university could at present be successfully sued for trying to dismiss a member of staff.

Some universities have already managed to reach agreement with some staff to limit the length of appointments. At Kyoto University's Research Institute for Fundamental Physics, for example, full and associate professors are usually limited to terms of 5 to 10 years, and research assistants to 3 to 6 years under an informal 'gentleman's agreement'. Changing the law would put such a system on firm legal footing.

But the new law could not be applied ▶