

Good news, for a change

Munich

WHEN the German science advisory council Wissenschaftsrat began last year the monumental and delicate task of evaluating all the research institutes of the former East German Academy of Sciences, researchers in both parts of Germany were fearful that German science, once unified, would emerge as less than the sum of its parts. East Germans, in particular, feared jealousy and vindictiveness from the Western evaluators, who were seen as competing for pieces of the same finite pie. "They (eastern German scientists) thought all we wanted was to turn out the lights" in their institutes, recalls Dieter Simon, chairman of Wissenschaftsrat.

But as the evaluation approached its midpoint last week, those fears have been laid to rest. A scientific infrastructure is beginning to take shape, at least on paper, in which the whole may be even more than simple addition would have indicated.

There is good news, for instance, on how many researchers from several former East Germany Academy institutes will have positions in new institutions that are now being

planned. Two weeks ago, Heinz Riesenhuber, the German Research and Technology Minister, estimated that 7,000–10,000 scientific personnel could be kept on out of approximately 15,000. The 5,000–8,000 lost positions, while unfortunate, are less than many had feared.

And in some areas, Wissenschaftsrat would like to retain an even higher percentage of researchers. In information sciences, for instance, the council recommends keeping as many as two thirds of researchers who have not already been hired by industry. In some mathematics institutes, the percentage may be even higher.

As he has done in earlier recommendations, Simon warns that the governments in Bonn and the *Länder* (states) must provide adequate funds to support the new institutions. Simon, who is known for not being easily ruffled, adds that the possibility that the old institutes could be shut down while their successor institutions are postponed for lack of funds, "gives me sleepless nights".

Under severe political pressure from the nearly bankrupt eastern *Länder*, Chancellor

Helmut Kohl agreed on 28 February that Bonn would give them an additional DM24,000 million. Although he sees the grant as an encouraging sign, Simon points out that the *Länder* have not yet promised to spend any of the new money on science. "It is still an open question whether anything filters down at all," he warns.

Perhaps the most promising sign for research in eastern Germany is the decision by Wissenschaftsrat to propose the establishment of the first Max Planck Institute in that part of the country. The proposal for a new institute in Halle dedicated to solid-state physics and electron microscopy is a recognition that the existing academy institute there is a "jewel of the former East Germany", as council spokesman Wilhelm Krull puts it.

But the recommendation is not without problems. For one, the Max Planck Gesellschaft, which would be expected to run the institute, already has highly respected institutes for solid-state physics (in Stuttgart) and electron microscopy (in Berlin). Nevertheless, Wissenschaftsrat was confident that there was little enough overlap to make a new Max Planck Institute feasible and desirable.

More challenging will be the need for

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DIETER SIMON, director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of European Law in Frankfurt, is chairman of the science council Wissenschaftsrat, which has been evaluating science in eastern Germany. Here, near the midpoint of the evaluation, he reflects on the emerging picture of how science in Germany is being unified.

"At the beginning, we all had good intentions. We saw the necessary unification of science and education as an opportunity to restructure our own obsolete system and that of East Germany and use our common resources to create a new structure. We were going to take clever advantage of a unique historical opportunity.

"Now it seems as if this enterprise is about to fail. What has happened? First, a miracle. Our much-criticized system of science and education in the West seemed to improve by the day as we learned more about the shortcomings in the system in the East.

"Sure, some of our professorships are not filled by the optimal people. But that problem pales by comparison to a system where membership in the Communist Party was a main criterion for selection.

"Sure, our universities had a poor student-faculty ratio, especially in these days of severe overcrowding. But over there, universities and institutes were not only immobile but also jam-packed full with unnecessary staff.

"Comparisons like these made it easy for us to forget our good intentions. On top of

that came practical problems. The reforms had to be carried out very quickly, so that students and professors alike did not have to wait around too long, their futures hanging in the balance, before a new structure was set up.

"But our long-term goal of basic structural reform in East and West and our short-term goal of giving concrete practical help to the East are working at cross-purposes.

"We simply do not have the time and distance to plan research centres that combine the advantages of non-university and university institutes and avoid their drawbacks. The same is true for facilities for practical training, for apprenticeships and for unconventional university courses. The Western system will simply be extended eastward.

"The next problem was a conflict of goals. It is not easy to bestow upon the East the benefit of our functioning system of doing science and at the same time for both sides to move forward toward a better common future. It has to go in stages: first compatibility, then reform.

"Thus the inherent absurdity of trying to bring back research in the East from non-university structures to universities, where, everyone in East and West agrees, it belongs. But in the West, just 45 per cent of federal research money goes to universities, a figure that shows no signs of changing. What kind of an example does this set?



Simon—good intentions.

Then there is the human factor. It is easy to make recommendations. But who puts all these changes into practice? Civil servants, of course. The same inflexible petty bureaucrats who choose, with a few notable exceptions, to stay in their offices in the West instead of going east where they are needed, leaving the ministries in the East

helpless to implement our recommendations.

"New ideas seem always to come up short in such a system. The tried and true 'funding instruments' we know in the West are not applied because the current conditions do not fit rules that have been invented for other situations. Instead, research groups are shoved out the door and pointed toward a 'market' that does not exist. If we are not careful projects, and entire institutions will fall through the cracks because they do not fit the dimensions of a civil servant's desk.

"We still have good intentions. But that will not be enough. We need to increase our tolerance for unorthodox solutions. We need to go to the limits of what the two systems will tolerate in our attempt to unify them. We may have to live with institutions that make us uncomfortable.

"But we cannot forget that our system is not perfect either. We have to force ourselves to remember our shortcomings every day.

"In a lot of ways, we *do* know better. But not in every way." □