

Dissent grows over Helmholtz proposals

Alison Abbott, Munich

Scientists at the German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ) in Heidelberg are stepping up their protests against proposed reforms at the Helmholtz Society, to which the centre belongs. The reforms are supposed to usher in a more competitive research regime.

On 26 April, top researchers at the centre, one of the 16 government-funded national research laboratories that make up the Helmholtz Society, wrote an open letter of protest to the research minister Edelgard Bulmahn, claiming that the reforms threatened their academic freedom.

The changes were suggested last year by the government as a way to restore productivity and industrial relevance at the Helmholtz laboratories. But the DKFZ researchers say the reforms will instead bind the labs in red tape and submit them to the control of management boards dominated by non-scientists.

They complain that their concerns over how the Helmholtz labs will be funded have been ignored. The scientists first put their objections to the DKFZ board and to heads of other Helmholtz centres last November.



Basic problems: Werner Franke fears a future of red tape if the Helmholtz Society reforms proceed.

Under the reform plan, an Association of Research Centres of the Helmholtz Society would be set up to design a coordinated research programme for the centres. Funding would be distributed by the federal research ministry according to six strategic areas of research — health, energy, environment, transport and space, structure of matter and ‘enabling’ technologies (such as new

research tools). Research programmes would be evaluated every five years, with regular milestones being set.

Werner Franke, head of the DKFZ’s Division for Cell Biology, says such centralized planning is reminiscent of the way the East German Academy of Sciences used to operate. “We see a breathtaking level of really Germanic red tape being introduced,” he says.

Franke also thinks the proposed association lacks the right mix of expertise. It will consist of the research minister, two research ministers from state governments, six external scientists and six representatives of industry as well as representatives from other German research organizations and from the finance ministries. “There are too many industrialists who do not understand the needs of basic research,” he says.

But Wolf-Michael Catenhusen, state secretary for research, says the changes will bring the centres in line with other countries. “There are really no grounds for bringing in a 1970s-style ideology debate to something that is simply introducing a modern instrument for administering research,” he says.

Detlev Ganten, president of the Helmholtz Society, says only a few scientists believe their academic freedom is under threat. Moreover, the research centres have agreed to join the new association on condition that each centre is allowed flexibility in its budget. This provision is expected to be in place this year.

Rudi Balling, director of the German Centre for Biotechnology in Braunschweig, says that the centres’ acceptance of the plan is absolutely contingent on this. “We need to be able to shift assigned budgets between projects, if the scientific results so dictate,” he says.

Martin Lipp, an immunologist who chairs the scientific advisory council at another Helmholtz centre, the Max Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine in Berlin, says that: “Overall, if carried out optimally, the restructuring is a positive thing which will enable us to respond better to developments in science.”

Mouse genome effort ‘on course’

Jonathan Knight, San Francisco

Public genome sequencers say they have met the goal they set for themselves last October, by producing crude sequencing data for almost the entire mouse genome.

But they haven’t yet figured out how to finish the project to the level of accuracy they would like to see, which would mean sequencing each base in the genome an average of 10 times over.

The Mouse Sequencing Consortium has been using the high-throughput ‘shotgun’ method pioneered by the private company Celera Genomics of Rockville, Maryland. This technique involves sequencing some 6 million fragments, each between 500 and 700 bases long, of the mouse genome and then assembling them later.

The public consortium says it has now sequenced 94% of the genome, hitting each base an average of three times. But the sequence data remain almost completely unassembled. The public database contains more than 15 million unordered fragments.

The consortium’s announcement came just 10 days after Celera revealed that it had completed and assembled 2.6 billion bases of the mouse genome (*Nature* 411, 8; 2001). Unlike the Celera data, the public data are available free to all researchers.

But the next phase of the project remains undefined. This was the plan all along, says

Jane Peterson, a project official at the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI), because the partial sequence data will be useful in working out which techniques to use to complete the genome.

Three corporate sponsors paid a quarter of the \$58 million cost of the initial phase. But so far no arrangements have been made for continued private support of the project. And although the NHGRI has ample funds to continue sequencing the mouse, no budgets for the next phase have yet been set.

“At this point we are shifting strategies,” says Robert Waterston, director of the Washington University genome sequencing centre. “We are developing plans to get the complete genome sequence.”



Rough rodent: the public consortium has announced an early draft of the mouse genome.