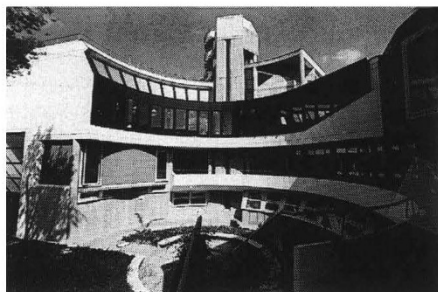


German astronomers fight rumoured closing of institute

Munich. Theoretical astrophysicists at the Max Planck Institute for Astrophysics at Garching near Munich say that their institute is on the brink of being closed — for all the wrong reasons.

The researchers accuse their funding agency, the Max Planck Society, of using a prolonged search for a new director as an excuse to shut down the institute, saving money into the bargain. They say that their



Will Max Planck pull the plug on its astrophysics institute?

scientific productivity and role in training students are being ignored.

The society says that the institute's fate will not be decided until October, when it receives the recommendations of two committees — one looking for a successor to Rudolf Kippenhahn, the institute's long-time director who retired last year, and the other reviewing the society's astronomy programmes. Officials insist that money is never a prime motive in closing down an institute, whatever its size, and that closure in fact offers the opportunity to start something new. In the meantime, scientists from around the world have rallied to the institute's defence.

The controversy arose after the society formed a committee, composed of nine Max Planck scientists and an international group of six independent scientists, to recruit a new director. While researchers wanted to abandon their single directorship in favour of the standard Max Planck system of a board of around five directors, the committee persisted in seeking — so far unsuccessfully — just one director. When one candidate turned down the job, the committee considered this as an indication that the institute may not be strong enough to attract a top-quality administrator.

The 31 scientists at the institute fear that the society's senate will use this as a reason to justify closing the institute. And they fear the worst after acting director Wolfgang Hillebrandt was asked recently to stop looking for candidates.

But Peter Schneider, a researcher at the

institute, says that the society may lose more science than it bargained for. And the savings will be small, he says, pointing out that the institute's budget represents only 0.7 per cent of the society's annual budget of DM1.4 billion (US\$900 million).

The society, which supports 56 large-scale research institutes in Germany, is certainly looking for ways to save money. Its budget has effectively stagnated in the last 20 years, and since reunification it has adopted several East German science programmes. The society continually assesses its programmes, shutting down parts that are no longer productive; in the past 10 years, 15 departments and three research groups have been replaced in this way. Two institutes were also closed, although both were reopened under different names and with the same staff.

By law, anyone working for more than 15 years at a Max Planck institute cannot be laid off. Those not offered jobs in other departments or institutes are eligible to receive a proportion of their salaries for a time, based on length of service.

At the moment, a commission of six scientists is reviewing the status of astronomy research, which is carried out in four institutes and one department. In the autumn, this commission will report to Hans Zacher, president of the society, who will combine its report with information from the recruitment committee to decide the future of the astrophysics institute.

One possibility is a merger of groups from the theoretical institute into other experimental institutes. But Schneider says that this would impinge on the freedom of his colleagues to choose their own projects. Such a move would also sacrifice the advantage of being near Munich, home of several large physics institutes and the European Southern Observatory.

Jean Audouze, current president of the institute's visiting committee — an international group of scientists who meet every two years to discuss the scientific progress of a particular Max Planck group — has received letters of support from scientists in several other countries who fear the institute may close. Each year the institute receives scores of visiting scientists, who collaborate for short periods of weeks or months; at present it is also host to 35 students.

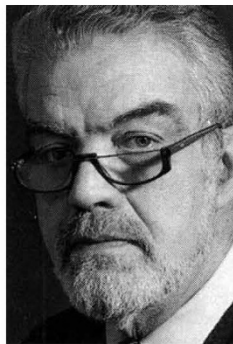
Audouze, president of the Paris Institute of Astrophysics, says that not a single scientific argument could support closure. "The institute does excellent research, and all who visit recognize that its strengths are at all levels — senior, junior and students", he says.

Allison Abbott

EMBL director quits after long fight over expansion

Munich. The director of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), Lennart Philipson, has resigned, saying that he is tired of a system that allows a single country to veto a project that has been approved by science committees. Delegates from each of EMBL's 15 member countries had long been aware of Philipson's frustration in trying to expand EMBL, but none were prepared for his announcement at this month's council meeting.

EMBL, set up in 1974 in Heidelberg, Germany, has grown considerably in the last decade under the leadership of Philipson —



Lennart Philipson

its staff from 300 to almost 800, and its annual budget from DM42 million (US\$27.5 million) to DM80 million. That growth has been matched by performance: EMBL now ranks as the world's third most influential molecular biology institute, according to citation rates per paper compiled by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in Philadelphia.

Philipson had a grand vision for a European venture that had little room for the 'nationalist stance' of some member countries and their reluctance to take money for their own national programmes. This attitude has caused considerable friction within the council.

He is also angry that council delegates have no negotiating power but rather attend meetings only to convey the decision of their governments. Last year (see *Nature* 351, 91; 1991), he criticized those who shape decisions about European collaborative projects, describing them as either "failed in research" or "inappropriately trained".

But many EMBL scientists also doubt the wisdom of a continuing expansionist policy. The sense of the laboratory as a huge extended family has disappeared, and a policy that prohibits researchers from staying longer than nine years makes difficult contact between projects.

Philipson will not be leaving until next April, two years before the end of his contract, but the search for a replacement may be difficult. Philipson succeeded EMBL's first director, Sir John Kendrew, in 1982 and was reappointed in 1989 after EMBL was unable to find a scientist willing to leave the bench temporarily to become an administrator.

Allison Abbott