

# France shifts research focus on to new regional centres

**Marseilles.** A large group of senior French research officials and politicians descended on the Mediterranean port of Marseilles last week to inaugurate two research institutes. Such a gathering of high-level officials outside Paris is rare, and symbolizes the importance of regional centres for the pursuit of two key research policies in France — decentralizing research from Paris, and concentrating different research bodies' resources within joint research institutes.

The two instituts fédératifs de recherche (IFR), as they are known, are part of a plan to create research 'poles'. These are loose federations of laboratories that bring together scientists from local research centres, universities, hospitals and industry to create a critical mass in particular research projects at a single site.

For example, the first of the two new centres, the Institut Jean-Roche, will house three laboratories of the national biomedical research organization, INSERM, and three from the fundamental research organization, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), at the site of the Faculty of Medicine of the Hôpital Nord, in Marseilles. Many of the laboratories were previously operated as joint laboratories with the University of the Mediterranean — formerly known as the University of Aix/Marseille II — which is also a partner in the new centres.

Research at the centre, which employs 148 full-time staff, including 73 researchers, will focus on cellular interactions in endocrinal, nervous and epithelial tissue, particularly on developing clinical applications, for example, for AIDS and cancer. François Couraud, the director of INSERM's Laboratoire de Neurobiologie des Canaux Ioniques, will head the new centre.

The second centre, the Institut Fédéraliste de Recherche de Biologie du Développement (IBDM), brings together nine INSERM laboratories and ten CNRS laboratories, at a site in Luminy, south of Marseilles. Research at the centre, which has 66 researchers, will link fundamental research on developmental biology with clinical research on genetic diseases. The cost of the operation is estimated at FFfr22 million (US\$4.32 million).

One of France's few medical genetics services is based at the nearby Timone Hospital. Jean François Mattei, who heads the hospital's paediatrics and medical genetics department, is also a member of the National Assembly (UDF, Bouches-du-Rhône) and an influential voice in French bioethics debates.

IBDM has sufficient laboratory space to bring in several new research teams, and is

negotiating for the transfer of research groups from Paris. But Christo Gordis, the head of the centre, concedes that enticing researchers and their families away from Paris remains difficult, despite the promise of good research facilities, *bouillabaisse*, and a sunny Mediterranean climate. Attracting top scientists from elsewhere in Europe seems to have been less difficult. Gordis himself is a German national, while Christopher Henderson, head of the centre's Laboratoire du Développement et Pathologie du Motoneurone Spinal, is British.

Indeed, one of the main goals of creating such regional research 'poles' is to decentralize research away from Paris and stimulate regional development. The greater Paris area, known as Ile de France, accounts for less than a fifth of France's population and only a quarter of its student population; but it carries out more than half of the country's publicly-funded research.

In 1992, the government plans to transfer around 4,500 researchers from Paris to regional centres by the end of the decade (see *Nature* 356, 373; 1992). This change has been promoted through CNRS, for example by recruiting two researchers to regional centres for every one in the capital, and investing in new regional centres offering well-equipped laboratories.

The second goal of such regional centres is to improve coordination between the various research organizations, particularly in the life sciences. Earlier this year the science ministry itself took control of a new national strategy for life sciences research, made up of 14 strategic programmes administered by ministerial committees, with such a goal in mind (see *Nature* 374, 206; 1995).

But the new government formed after the election of Jacques Chirac as president of France in May seems likely to hand over control of the programme to the research organizations themselves, preferring to support initiatives such as the creation of IFRs.

Speaking at last week's inauguration, Elisabeth Dufourcq, the secretary of state for research, told the heads of the research organizations that "I don't want to substitute my central ministry for your roles". She added that the national life science strategy would in future be administered in "real concertation" with the research agencies.

Supporting this approach, Philippe Lazar, director general of INSERM, said that there is a need "to respect the different mission of the research organizations, but bring together their resources". The creation of IFRs, added Guy Aubert, director-general of CNRS, will allow "increased firepower" with the same resource, by sharing the costs of equipment and overheads. **Declan Butler**

# UK urged to seek role as 'mecca' for top graduates

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. Sir Martin Rees, the astronomer royal, suggested this week that the British government should make a deliberate effort to turn Britain into "the country of choice" for top-ranking graduate students whose first instinct is to go to the United States.

Delivering his presidential address to the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BA), he also called on the government to allow defence scientists greater freedom to discuss their work with colleagues in the rest of the scientific community.

Rees, who is Royal Society research professor of astronomy at the University of Cambridge, claimed that the quality and traditions of the best UK research institutions — as well as the primacy of English as the language of science — suggested that it should be possible for them to match



Rees: UK could exploit its advantages further.

the "blandishments" of the United States for internationally mobile talent.

"Our universities have a fine record for attracting overseas students, but we should surely press it further," Rees told the BA meeting at the University of Newcastle. "Britain could surely exploit more fully its manifest comparative advantage as a magnet for talent, a location for research centres, and as an incubator for discovery and invention."

In his comments on government secrecy, he compared the situation in Britain to the relative openness of US defence research establishments. Claiming that pervasive secrecy inhibits well-informed and open debate, Rees said that he had had contact with many physicists from institutions such as the Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories — but none with their British counterparts.

Rees also expressed concern about the dangers of imposing excessive *dirigisme* and short-term financial accountability on the research community. In particular, he warned that excessive efforts to impose a "business-like perception of efficiency" on the research community could backfire, in particular by discouraging the most creative individuals from pursuing a research career altogether. "We need to be businesslike," admitted Rees. "But that doesn't mean that we should operate too much like a business." David Dickson