

German institute renews east-west unease

Munich. East-west tensions have erupted in Berlin over a decision to move a molecular pharmacology research institute from decrepit buildings on the eastern edge of the city to a purpose-built home at the Max Delbrück Centre, a national research centre for molecular medicine.

The decision, announced two weeks ago, has been welcomed by the staff of the Institute for Molecular Pharmacology, known as the FMP. After a rocky start, the future of the institute is now looking secure following the appointment this month of its first permanent director, five years after its foundation.

But the decision has been strongly criticized by west Berlin's nearly bankrupt Free University, which, keen to boost its scientific credentials, had fought hard to host the institute.

The FMP was founded as a successor to a former research institute of East Germany's Academy of Sciences on the recommendation of Germany's science council, the *Wissenschaftsrat*, which evaluated all the academy's research institutes after reunification. The science council had been particularly impressed by the strength of the former institute's peptide synthesis unit.

But the new institute has had great difficulty in finding a permanent director. Three west German scientists were appointed, only to withdraw before accepting the position permanently. A crucial factor in each case was the frustration of dealing with the complicated politics of a city facing the financial burden of rebuilding the east. None of the candidates was prepared to give up a more certain career in the west.

Four years ago, the FMP's scientific advisory committee decided that, to overcome its isolation from the academic community, the institute should relocate to the Berlin

Buch science area in the east of the city, and link up with the Max Delbrück Centre, also founded after reunification. The federal and Berlin research ministries agreed in principle to split the costs of a new building.

Since then, however, Berlin's financial situation has deteriorated considerably (see box, below left), and tensions between 'wessies' and 'ossies' have increased. The signing of the financial agreement was delayed, and uncertainty has increased for the institute's 150 staff.

The delay was exploited earlier this year by the Free University, which has suffered heavily from Berlin's financial problems, with massive reductions in student numbers and the closure of faculties and departments (see *Nature* 380, 278; 1996).

Seeing the chance to strengthen its science base, it put in a counter-bid to host the institute, including an offer of university chairs to several leading members of the FMP. The attractiveness of this offer threw further doubt on the Buch option, and a political battle began.

The Berlin government was split. Some wanted the Free University's concept to be developed further because of the potential savings, but others felt that as a matter of principle the institute should not be transferred to a western institution.

The federal government opposed the Free University's offer, as it did not want to be seen to be financing what could be mistaken for a university institute. According to the German constitution, universities are exclusively the domain of *Länder* (state) governments.

Last month's final decision to transfer the institute to Buch has done little to ease east-west tensions, even though the FMP's new director, Walter Rosenthal, describes the agreement as "a good choice".

Rosenthal says that he is "glad that the power struggle is over". He is particularly pleased that the institute will remain under one roof, as this would probably not have been possible under the university's plan. But he accepts that for the next few years he will be preoccupied with the political and administrative battles that are likely to continue until the institute is running smoothly.

However, Peter Gaetgens, dean of the science faculty of the Free University, says that he is disappointed by the decision, which he describes as "a wrong one". He

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On the move: the Institute for Molecular Pharmacology will soon have a new home.

says that the Max Delbrück Centre already has enough scientists. By contrast, he argues, German universities have been weakened by increased teaching loads, and Berlin's in particular by devastating budget cuts.

Gaetgens insists that the FMP would have gained considerably from the links that the university was offering. He expresses doubt that the university will now make a significant number of chairs available for FMP staff, as the 50 km separating Buch and the Free University make meaningful interaction unlikely.

But Folk Fabich, head of the Berlin Research Association, Forschungs Verbund Berlin, which administers eight research institutes, has little sympathy with the university. He criticizes the three former acting directors for making commitments they were not prepared to meet, and says he is glad the institute is moving to Buch.

Fabich points out that the FMP is not the only institute in Berlin to have suffered from the difficulty of keeping a director. The Ferdinand Braun Institute for High Frequency Technology is also this month appointing its fourth director in five years.

A former director, Peter Russer, who returned to his chair in Munich last year, admits that "it is hard for a westerner to survive in an east German research institute", as there remains a clash of cultures and difficulties in establishing competitive research programmes. **Alison Abbott**

Berlin's universities face further squeeze

Munich. Berlin's science and research budget could face further cuts next year of up to DM160 million (US\$108 million), according to documents leaked from the city's finance ministry. A DM200-million cut was imposed on Berlin's three universities in an emergency budget earlier this year.

If formally approved, the new cuts would almost certainly have to be absorbed entirely by the universities, as the funding of non-university research institutes is fixed by binding agreements with the German federal government.

University spending is a low priority in Berlin, which is verging on bankruptcy. The rumoured cuts represent more than a third of the reductions in the city's whole budget next year, and would fall in

particular on younger staff and students. Professors have tenure, and are not easy to dismiss.

The leaked documents suggest that the universities cannot expect any budget increase before the end of the decade at the earliest. That raises the spectre that one of the city's universities may have to close. Student numbers have already been cut drastically, and many faculties have been merged or closed.

The proposed cuts have been attacked by Peter Radunski, Berlin's research minister, who is to meet Eberhard Diepgen, the city's mayor, this week to defend the universities. A final decision on the 1997 budget will be made next March. **Quirin Schiermeier**