

Microsoft 'in talks' to set up research base in Cambridge

[LONDON] Plans to set up a research centre at Cambridge in the United Kingdom to concentrate on long-term, strategic research leading to the next generation of computers are reported to be in the final stages of development by Bill Gates, founder and chairman of computer software giant Microsoft.

The centre would be owned and operated by Microsoft, but is expected to have close links to the University of Cambridge. Microsoft has had several meetings with university officials, including members of the university's council. According to some reports, one proposal is that academic staff teaching at the university should be allowed to carry out research at the Microsoft centre.

A spokesman for Microsoft says the company is "neither confirming or denying" the reports. But plans are believed to be well advanced. Alec Broers, vice-chancellor of the university, said that talks with Microsoft were "at an early stage". A statement released by the university on Monday (2 June) said that "we would be delighted if these talks result in some type of collaboration".

Two sites in the west of the town have been identified for the centre, and an official announcement is expected within a month. The plans follow a speech given by Gates earlier this year in which he revealed that Microsoft Research would be doubling in size within the next two years. Gates told the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Seattle, Washington, that Microsoft's expansion plans were limited only by its ability to recruit talented people. The company spends \$2 billion a year on research and development.

The decision to establish a major research presence in Europe — in addition to the research facility in Seattle — appears to have been flagged during a speech Gates made to the World Economic Forum in Switzerland last year, in which he raised the issue of Europe's relatively low contribution to global software research. Various sites in Europe are believed to have been investigated for the company's planned move across the Atlantic before Gates settled on Cambridge.

Contacts between Microsoft and the University of Cambridge are believed to have been facilitated by Stephen Hawking, Lucasian Professor of Mathematics, who taught cosmology to Nathan Myhrvold, Microsoft's chief technology officer.

The university has recently launched plans to set up a physical sciences and technology research site, also in the west of Cambridge. Gates is also said to be planning to make a separate donation to the university to fund a new science block.

Ehsan Masood

Italian universities move to peer review for grants

[MUNICH] In a major shift in its university policy, Italy is to replace its much-criticized system under which national research grants are allocated by committees of 'experts' with a system based primarily on peer review and national strategic priorities.

In future, responsibility for national university grant allocation will lie in the hands of a small body of five academics, chosen by the research ministry. And, to encourage collaboration, government grants will be awarded only to joint projects between different research departments or universities.

These changes are part of a new law on universities that comes into effect next month. They are intended to bring procedures for supporting university research closer in line with international norms, and to increase competition between universities and between individual departments. But, while the reforms have been broadly welcomed, some researchers are concerned that the five-member panel will lack the breadth required to judge the whole spectrum of Italian science.

Italy's 60 universities receive relatively little support for research compared to universities in some other European countries. Under a law passed in the early 1990s, 60 per cent of the IL250 billion (US\$147 million) provided annually by the government for university research is distributed by the universities themselves, and the rest is distributed by Italy's national council for universities, the CUN (Consiglio nazionale universitario).

Under the present system, grant applications are judged by 14 committees — one for each discipline — each made up of about ten experts elected from the academic community. Although this system is democratic, there is a growing recognition that it fails to concentrate money on the most deserving projects.

In particular, each elected member is susceptible to lobbying. To minimize con-

flict, therefore, funds tend to be sprinkled evenly across the research community.

Under the new law, a single grant review committee will be established each year. It will have five members selected by Luigi Berlinguer, the research minister, from 15 names put forward by the Association of University Rectors, the government's scientific advisory group, the CNST (Consiglio nazionale scienza tecnologia) and CUN.

These five will select referees to judge each research application, and will be responsible for the allocation of grants based on a combination of referees' reports and national strategic priorities. At the same time, each of the 14 disciplines will be guaranteed 3 per cent of the total CUN research budget — a safety net to protect the overall health of Italian research.

The CUN grants will not fund entirely new projects, but will instead provide additional support for projects already receiving backing from local university research funds. Universities will thus have more control in pre-selecting projects.

Individuals will not be able to apply directly for CUN funds. Instead, a limited number of projects will be selected by local universities. Collaborations within a university will be entitled to a 40 per cent supplement to their local funds, while those between universities will be entitled to a 60 per cent supplement.

A spokesman for the research ministry says that referees will be chosen from a list of qualified individuals published on the Internet, and that the anonymity of the referees will eliminate the power of individual lobbies. The most important advantage of the new system, he says, is the way it encourages collaboration between research teams.

Some remain sceptical. Pietergiorgio Strata, a professor of neurophysiology at the University of Turin, says the new system ignores a key aspect of peer review. "The selection of referees should be done by experts in the field, not by drawing on a list of possible candidates."

Others are more optimistic. Alessandro Finazzi-Agro, a biochemist who is rector of the Tor Vergata University in Rome, shares Strata's concern, but feels that the new law will at least require universities to think more carefully about which applications they are prepared to support, and that the 'five wise men' of the new grants committee will be freer to make strategic selections.

According to Finazzi-Agro, the new system is an experiment, and "we'll have to wait and see how it works". In fact, the academic community has little time to debate its merits. The first call for grant applications goes out next week, with a deadline for submission next month.

Alison Abbott

