

Mediators call for change to science of Human Brain Project

Contentious elimination of cognitive and systems neuroscience programmes should be reversed, report recommends.

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Mediators appointed to analyse the rifts within Europe's ambitious €1-billion (US\$1.1-billion) Human Brain Project (HBP) have called for far-reaching changes in both its governance and its scientific programmes. Most significantly, the report recommends that cognitive neuroscience and systems neuroscience should be reinstated into the HBP.

The mediation committee, led by engineer Wolfgang Marquardt, director of Germany's national Jülich Research Centre, sent its final report to the HBP board of directors on 9 March, and issued a press release summarizing its findings. (The full report will not be published until after the board, a 22-strong team of scientists, discusses its contents at a meeting on 17–18 March).

The European Commission flagship project, which launched in October 2013, is intended to boost supercomputing through neuroscience, with the aim of simulating the brain in a computer. But the project has been racked with dissent from the outset.

In early 2014, a three-person committee of scientists who ran the HBP's scientific direction revealed that they planned to eliminate cognitive neuroscience from the initiative, which precipitated a [mass protest](#). More than 150 of Europe's leading neuroscientists signed a letter to the European Commission, complaining about the project's management and charging that the HBP plan to simulate the brain using only 'bottom-up' data on the behaviour of neurons was doomed to failure if it did not include the top-down constraints provided by systems and cognitive neuroscience.

'Positive step'

The mediation committee seems to agree: it says that systems and cognitive neuroscience should be reintroduced as 'cross-cutting' projects linking the HBP's central pillars. Alexandre Pouget, a neuroscientist at the University of Geneva in Switzerland who helped coordinate the protest, calls this "a very positive step". But he adds that the recommendation on its own will not be quite enough: "The impact of this will depend on the other recommendations for the Human Brain Project's science."

Those details will be known only when the mediation committee publishes its full report. But in its press release, the committee also says that the HBP must put more emphasis on developing IT platforms for clinical neurology and psychiatry, and on demonstrating the value it adds to neuroscience research.

The report also recommends changes to the HBP's governance. Different bodies should undertake the research aspect, developing scientific strategy and managing and monitoring the HBP, it adds: "The members of the decision-making bodies must not work in projects which are affected by these decisions."

Similar changes were also proposed by the European Commission in a separate evaluation of the HBP, whose conclusions were [published](#) on 6 March.

The HBP board has already accepted the proposed governance changes in principle; earlier in the week, it [announced](#) that it had taken a first step towards reform by voting to disband the executive committee that was running the project.

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