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## Young at heart

A few weeks ago, the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, Germany, resembled a scientific version of a football training camp. A hundred or so prospective graduate students displayed an air of excitement as they huddled around possible mentors and congregated at the institute's double-helix fountain. But there was a sense of anxiety, too, because by the end of the week, only half of them would be offered a studentship slot for the autumn — the rest would go home empty-handed, the equivalent of not making the team.

The visitors had already been screened down from about 420 applicants — a sizeable response that was not lost on the European Research Council (ERC). Earlier last month, the ERC met to discuss how to reshape European academic research to attract students and be competitive with labs in the United States. It cited EMBL as a model for the initiative.

So what is the secret of EMBL's success? Iain Mattaj, the institute's scientific coordinator, says that its turnover system plays a large role. Scientific group leaders tend to be young — usually having just finished their first postdoc — and work under five-year contracts, which are renewable for up to four more years. This means that the lab has a constant influx of new ideas and keeps scientific stagnation at bay — qualities that attract graduate students. "The pluses of having the turnover system are enormous," says Mattaj. "It brings a tremendous vitality."

But, he admits, there are downsides, too. Perhaps the biggest is that the turnover and youthfulness are far less attractive to prospective postdocs, who want mentors who are more established. Even so, the ability to attract energetic students — and the palpable energy EMBL emits during 'draft day' — is something other European research institutes should consider emulating.

**Paul Smaglik**  
*Naturejobs* editor



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