EMBL Council passes resolutions on important ILO, EBI issues

The Council of 16 Member States governing EMBL met in November, 1999, to discuss a number of issues of vital importance to the Laboratory. Among these were recent decisions by the International Labour Organization’s Administrative Tribunal, funding for the EBI, and proposed changes in Staff Regulations. The Council heard from both the staff and management and passed resolutions aimed at finding solutions to these pressing issues.

The Council also heard from Dr. Fotis Kafatos, Director General EMBL, who gave a detailed presentation of the draft proposal for EMBL’s next Scientific Programme, which will cover the period from 2001-2005. Fotis is currently on the road visiting all of the member states, to discuss the plan in depth with scientists and representatives of government ministries. After these meetings, the Laboratory will prepare a final version of the Programme to be voted on by Council at the end of this year.

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Latest ILO rulings announced...

Research Reports on CD-ROM

The 1998 EMBL Research Reports have shrunk! What used to be a thick green book has now been produced as a CD-ROM for Mac and PC platforms. The disk also contains EMBL’s PhD Programme Brochure for the year 2000. The new format will permit full-text searches, quick links to updates on our WWN site, and the inclusion of multimedia such as films, etc. Copies will be distributed starting Feb. 14; they can also be requested from the EBI.

EMBL alumni have gone on to do fascinating things, and our research is in the news. This issue presents the first installment of a regular series on our former colleagues. Patricia Kahn started her EMBL career as a staff scientist in the Differentiation Programme; later she joined the Data Library (now EBI) and was instrumental in establishing SWISS-PROT at EMBL, and helped to develop the concept of the EBI. Since her departure she has established an international reputation as a science journalist, first as a European correspondent to Science magazine, and now as associate editor of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative Report.

Where’s Patricia Kahn?

EMBL alumni feature...
EMBL Council responds to ILO ruling

Latest ILO News:

On Feb. 3, 2000, the ILO dismissed several complaints regarding salary adjustments awarded by Council in 1996 and 1997, stating that “the Tribunal has no reason to conclude that salary levels decided upon for the year 1996 [and 1997] jeopardise the basic conditions of employment to the preservation of which the complainants are entitled.”

When the EMBL Council met in Heidelberg in November, among the top issues on the agenda were Ruling 1887 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), a major loss of resources at the EBI due to changes in EU funding policy under the Fifth Framework, and a number of themes related to staff regulations.

The ILO case

The ILO ruling, announced in July, 1999, came in response to a case filed by some members of staff regarding the Council’s pay award from 1995. The wording of the decision left room for interpretation as to how this should be done. The Director General and Administrative Director made an announcement to staff about the situation (as outlined in the Director General’s Supplement to EMBL Acta 2); the issue was subsequently discussed in an open forum at a meeting called by the Staff Association (see the article below).

The Council agreed that the text of the judgment could lead to “significantly different interpretations” and passed a resolution pledging to “seek authentic interpretation urgently from the ILOAT in order to enable the Council to take necessary action without delay.” It also pledged “in principle to fund the salary adjustments identified in the Co-ordinated Organisations 40th and 45th Reports with effect from 1 July 1995 through a revision of the CVI.”

In mid-January, the ILOAT responded to the request for clarification with the following statement:

“...For the Tribunal, the terms of its ruling are clear. It is now up to the Laboratory to execute it in the way it understands it. If the complainants are dissatisfied with the manner in which the judgment is executed, it would be open to them to file a further application with the Tribunal for the execution of judgment 1887.”

According to Administrative Director Barton Dodd, “This obviously does not provide the definitive guidance that Council took the initiative to seek. We have forwarded the response to Council from the Staff Association.

What is happening with the ILO Case?

During the weeks leading up to the most recent EMBL Council Meeting, which was held in November, the ILO salary dispute became a source of tension throughout EMBL. Preparatory events for the Meeting (the general assemblies held by the Administration and by the Staff Association, and also the Staff Association ballot for determining how to pursue the case) inspired heated discussions concerning the pursuit by Staff of an 8% salary scale increase that would take into account missed adjustments from 1991 through 1995, versus a settlement for only the 2.1% salary increase that should have been adopted in 1995. This issue dramatically polarized the Staff. Furthermore, these discussions made it clear that a gap in communication and trust had formed between the Staff and Administration. On the positive side, however, these events were taken as a warning that the situation had reached a critical point. As a consequence, steps were taken to convince the Council that this issue must be dealt with fairly, and as soon as possible.

As the Director General pointed out at a third general assembly that was held on November 30th, Council did, in fact, take the problem seriously. This was partly the result of the efforts of the Administration. This outcome was also strongly influenced by a well attended session in which the delegates were given the opportunity to meet members of Staff, and by the results of the ballot, which convinced many of the delegates that the Staff are not, in fact, just being greedy. As things stand now, Council has agreed in principle to implement the legally valid interpretation of the ILO court ruling, once a clarification of this point has been made by the ILO. Furthermore, they decided to initiate the inquiry regarding the clarification themselves, rather than leaving it to the Staff to do at their own expense (note: the ballot of former Staff which had to be postponed until after the meeting due to problems in obtaining contact addresses, has now been postponed indefinitely since Council is doing the work involved in clarifying the verdict). Together with the Administration, Council is taking steps toward implementing the appropriate salary increase, attempting at the same time to minimize the negative impact on the Staff and on the competitiveness of the institute. Toward this end, the Director General has been instructed to gather and present alternative solutions for the problem at the next meeting of Council in March. More importantly, these ideas will be gathered in consultation with the Programme Coordinators and with the Staff Association, a positive step toward re-establishing communication between the Administration and Staff. In this context it is important to mention that Administration is regularly consulting members of the Staff Association, as they did before the Council meeting, which we believe is important to resolve this crisis in an acceptable fashion.

We would like to point out that, although the Staff Association is pleased with the outcome of this meeting of the EMBL Council and believes that the Administration will do everything possible to influence Council to continue in this direction, it is nevertheless taking measures to prevent the loss of Staff rights on this issue, in case the situation does not resolve itself satisfactorily after all.

Finally, we would like to thank the Administration, the Council delegates, and the members of Staff for their active participation in the discussion regarding the ILO case. You all played an important part in making this meeting go as well as could possibly be hoped for.

Participants at the Alumni Meeting held from Oct. 21-23, 1999, decided to found a formal EMBL Alumni Association. Angus Lamond was elected to chair a committee to draw up a charter for the association, whose purpose will be to promote scientific exchange in the field of molecular biology and related areas throughout Europe. Another goal is establish and maintain a network between members and the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). The Association will organize meetings and promote scientific publications and hopes to find means to support young scientists. It is open to all former employees of EMBL, both scientific and non-scientific, and is expected to begin operations soon.
EMBL gears up to handle heavier conference and course schedule

EMBL’s Conference and Course Office is bustling with activity. The number of events has more than doubled since last year, with a total of 20 conferences and courses scheduled for 2000. To accommodate the increase in workload and to ensure high technical standards for the events, the CCO has been incorporated into the Photolab. Two new colleagues, Andrea Washington and Sylvie Helbing, joined the team in 1999. Their presence will also help cover for Lena Reunis who will be on maternity leave until summer’s end.

Together, the team is working hard to provide an integrated and modern approach to conference organization. “What we are aiming for is complete conference service – from initial negotiations with organizers, to administrative practicities, to conference hosting and audio-visual support,” says Doros Panayi, head of the Photolab. “Thanks to the help of the Computer and Networking Group, information and registration for each conference staff can deal with the conference and course hosting and audio-visual support,” says Doros Panayi, head of the Photolab. “Thanks to the help of the Computer and Networking Group, information and registration for each conference staff can deal with the conference and course hosting and audio-visual support.”

The staff of the Photolab intend to take full advantage of developments in communications technology to make the process easier for both organizers and participants. “In addition to the obvious benefits that the Internet offers,” says Doros, “we can now use any current technology to help speakers get their message across.” Researchers can submit the files and visual aids for their presentations from their computers back home. In collaboration with the Computer and Networking Group, the Photolab is keeping a close eye on developments in Internet bandwidth and related technologies, with the eventual aim of broadcasting talks via the web and archiving transcripts of some presentations and putting them online.

In order to ensure modern and reliable audio-visual service, the conference rooms and facilities are also being whipped into shape. After 20 years, Room 202, the small seminar room, will soon be refitted with modern sound and digital projection equipment. “These upgraded facilities will be permanent fixtures in the room rather than ad hoc solutions as before,” says Doros. Longer-term plans are also in the works to modernize the facilities in the Operon suite.

“Given the growing success of EMBL’s conference and courses over the past years, it was definitely time to move forward,” says Doros. “The reorganization has put us in a position to offer a complete and state-of-the-art approach to conference organization.”

For a full list of events at the EMBL, in 2000, visit the Conference and Course website at http://www-db.embl-heidelberg.de:4321/CoursesConferences.html – Sarah Sherswood

addresses staff and EU financial issues

Last summer, the EBI and other European institutes went through the process of applying for funds under the European Union’s Fifth Framework Programme. In the past, the EBI has received nearly half of its funding from the EU. The 1999 applications were rejected, however, on the grounds that EU member countries had instructed the European Commission not to support “core funding and operational costs for infrastructure,” with the rationale that individual nations would then have more flexibility to provide funding for worthy projects. Since research activities would continue to be funded, some of the affected institutes did not realize that the fine print of the Programme could have dramatic consequences on their overall budgets.

Many consider the EBI to be under-funded already, and cuts on this scale would have had devastating consequences, so the Council acted swiftly to come up with a solution. The result was a three-part resolution. “Recognizing the crucial importance of bioinformatics for the development of molecular biology, biotechnology and molecular medicine,” and also recognizing EMBL’s past efforts and the need for “a strong European infrastructure in bioinformatics,” the Council stated that it “Agrees to make best efforts to maintain and develop the EBI alongside other EMBL priorities within the next Indicative Scheme;” “Agrees in principle for the year 2000 to meet the current deficit in external income by providing additional funding;” and “Instructs the Director-General to submit a supplementary budget for that year at the earliest opportunity.”

Delegates from the United Kingdom affirmed that their country would provide funds in the event of an immediate budget shortfall.

Staff regulations

At the meeting the Laboratory management, in complete agreement with the Staff Association, made suggestions regarding changes in Laboratory policies.

EMBL KINDELAUS 1999

pictures from the inauguration on November 19, 1999

photos by Marietta Schupp, EMBL

An appeal for support for the EBI

As the implications of a shift in funding policy under the EU’s Fifth Framework became clear (see previous article), the EBI and other institutes found themselves suddenly scrambling for support. The urgency of the situation prompted Michael Ashburner, one of the Heads of the Hinxton Outstation, to sound the alarm in a letter to Nature (Vol. 402, Nov. 4, 1999). “A failure of funding now is particularly ironic given that we are on the verge of elucidating the entire human genome sequence,” Ashburner writes. “This prospect is a stark contrast with the commitment and vision shown by biology funding agencies in the United States and Japan.” What is needed, he continues, is sustained funding for infrastructure. If no solution is found, “European research in the biological sciences, and all that flows from it, will suffer.”

The letter was co-signed by 64 researchers from throughout the world, within a few days of its publication, dozens more had added their names.

“It is hard to think of any activity which does more to enhance the reputation of biomedical research in the EU or which can approach the EBI in terms of its impact on European research and society,” wrote Professor David J. Porteous, Head of the Medical Genetics Section in the Department of Medical Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.

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Bernard Jacq, member of the CNRS “Genomes” Commission (France) contributed, “The recent EBI research projects, including the ArrayExpress database and data mining tools for datasets, are of crucial importance for the future of biological research in the world. Excellent collections of data such as SWISS-PROT and FlyBase are also of invaluable help in a scientist’s everyday life. It is essential that not only the present financial resources supporting infrastructure at EBI are maintained but that they can rapidly increase so as to compare to that of the American equivalent resources, the NCBI.” – Russ Hodge

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Patricia Kahn started her career at EMBL as a staff scientist in the Differentiation Programme. Later she joined the still young EMBL Data Library – activities which later delved into the EBI — working on the EMBL Database and playing a major role in establishing SWISS-Prot with EMBO. Upon leaving the Laboratory, she spent several years as a European correspondent to Science magazine. Note she is Associate Editor of the “IAVI Report”, a publication of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, headquartered in New York. She spoke with us during a recent visit to EMBL.

“I became increasingly captivated by all this new sequence data and the very interesting biological questions that could be asked. A new era was coming where this information could be used in tremendously creative ways, and I became interested in helping to make that happen.

There was also clearly a communications problem. In these early days, people interested in sequences came from all over the world, and we were publishing on all sorts of overlapping works. This resulted in people being examined and monitored. Contact the Safety Office or Personnel Section for more information.

Faced with the conspicuous advancement of electronic publishing, concerns about the future of the peer review system that has for decades provided quality control within the scientific community are strongly felt in many fields. But the world within which scientific practice is now embedded is very different from the one that EMBO had to make a new home for in 1998. The EMBO Passenger Programme, which has the aim of providing a single site at which all science can be freely searched, grew in importance, as something that required a new concept, but as something that required something that was different.

The technological substrate through which globalization flows, inundating the entire planet is based on electronics: computers, the Internet, mobile phones, etc. The unifying theme behind all the developments in this area of research and development seems to be the need for an overall strategy to overcome all of these obstacles to the peer review system. The world within which scientific practice is now embedded is very different from the one that EMBO had to make a new home for in 1998. The EMBO Journal, which has the aim of providing a single site at which all science can be freely searched, grew in importance, not only as a concept, but as something that required action during 1998. The endless rounds of discussions and negotiations related to this were facilitated by the expansion of EMBO, as being a good development for molecular biology in Europe.

— Frank Gannon

Administrative announcement:

As of January 1, 2000, EMBLhas a new employee physician (“Behandlungsarzt”). A panel of doctors at the “Institut für Arbeits- und Sozialmedizin”, in Heidelberg, Hospitalstrasse (near Biozentrum), will take over for Dr. R. Bühler, whose contract with EMBL ended in December. Physicians at the Institute will work closely with EMBL’s Scientific Office and Management to ensure that all medical aspects of health and safety in the workplace are professionally examined and monitored. Please note that physicians from the Institute will not act as personal doctors for staff. Services now offered include over-watching visits, physician coverage throughout the year, a choice of male or female physicians, and increased information for staff regarding tests and procedures. Contact the Safety Office or Personnel Section for more information.

Photographs by Doug Young, EMBL.
Alun was enthusiastic about the subject and led me by the hand through the writing process. After I submitted it, he called back and said, “I don’t know if I mentioned this to you, but at Science magazine we say that when you submit an article, you’ve done about 50% of the work.” Thus began a very satisfying editing process which taught me a lot. The article was published as the lead story in Science magazine that week, which was exhilarating -- and I was hooked.

I spent the next six years writing for Science. Some of my work was covering political topics related to Eastern Europe and German reunification, and some scientific ones. My main area was genome science and German science policy, just as big genome projects were taking off and genome research was becoming a real field unto itself, -- in a sense it was a continuation of my interests from the data library.

What are you writing about now?

I work for a non-governmental organization called the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI), which is trying to catalyse the development of an AIDS vaccine. We raise money from wealthy individuals -- recently we received a very significant donation from Bill Gates -- and foundations, and most recently have acquired our first government sponsors, the UK and the Netherlands. We use this money to fund work on vaccines that are still in the laboratory but that have shown promise in laboratory animals, and we help speed their progress through the many difficult hurdles to clinical studies. Besides giving funds, we bring in a lot of expertise that most academic researchers don’t have -- for example, in manufacturing vaccines for trials and doing clinical studies, especially in developing countries, which is our emphasis.

Most antigens for HIV and the recombinant DNA-based technologies that are almost always used to produce vaccines are patented by someone. This increases costs and means that vaccines might take years and years to get to the poorer countries, this is unacceptable particularly for HIV, which is wiping out generations of people in these countries. IAVI is attempting to address this problem creatively: in exchange for funding to manufacturers and laboratories, we do something absolutely unique in drug or vaccine development: we ask for an agreement that if the vaccine is successful, it be made available in the poorest countries for only a small increase over cost. The goal is to avoid the time lag that it would otherwise take to get a vaccine to get to the populations that are most affected.

Back to your question about my work. My main involvement is with a publication called the IAVI Report, which covers the science and policy issues surrounding AIDS vaccine development. It covers a great breadth of issues, from scientific events, meetings, AIDS vaccine research, politics and ethical issues, to guidelines for AIDS vaccine trials, which are particularly important when vaccines developed in industrialized countries are being tried in developing ones. It’s the only publication in the world covering this area, and it’s caught on beyond our wildest expectations: we now have nearly 10,000 subscribers in about 120 countries.

Is journalism a viable alternative for scientists who may want to leave the bench?

I am often approached by scientists who are actively interested in a different kind of career... Even in my own area, there are tremendous, exciting opportunities outside the lab.