

Life science research in Eastern Europe

A View from Poland

by Marta Miaczynska

In 2005, I took the brave – some would say crazy – step of returning to Poland to continue my career in molecular cell biology after twelve years as a PhD student and postdoc in Austria and Germany. Despite infrastructure problems, the shortage of positions and under-funding of research in Poland, I wanted to return to my home country.

Two years later, I have no regrets. I have a group leader position at the International Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Warsaw (IIMCB), grants from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, the Wellcome Trust, the European Commission (EC), the Max Planck Society and the Polish Ministry of Science, and a research team of nine people including Polish postdocs repatriated from abroad. Is this the sign of a sea-change in Polish science? I believe so, although I recognise that my experience is uncommon; the Polish scientific system remains far from perfect and, indeed, needs sweeping reform.

Poland is widely criticised – especially by its expatriate scientists who have moved abroad in search of a better climate for research – for its inbreeding and nepotism; its opaque appointments procedures that tend to hire from within departments and institutes rather than looking for outside talent. There are not enough positions for young faculty members and, consequently, it can be a long wait for an independent position. Such difficulties in achieving early independence do not attract our young compatriots back from abroad. The government does not give sufficient priority to research and development; it does not appreciate science's potential to stimulate the economy and, consequently, does not do enough

to encourage science-based industry and technology transfer.

Despite all these negative aspects, Poland has great potential to develop a strong research base. Its population is generally well-educated, especially in science and maths, meaning that there are many good students and a large untapped human



potential for the development of science and technology. What's more, the Polish economy and those of other countries that recently became members of the European Union (EU) is growing at a rate that cannot be matched by the more established Western economies.

Some institutes are already recruiting new independent researchers – mostly those returning from abroad. In my institute, all group leader appointments are made as a result of an international competition overseen by foreign experts constituting the International Advisory Board of the IIMCB. Moreover, a wide range of grants are available from sources outside Poland (the Howard Hughes Medical In-

stitute, EMBO and the Wellcome Trust, for example) specifically to help researchers settling in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Importantly also, inside Poland there is an increasing understanding that the country needs to attract its native scientists back from abroad. The Foundation for Polish Science, an independent non-profit organization supporting scientists and institutions through a large number of initiatives, has recently added to its portfolio reintegration grants for returning Polish researchers (the HOMING programme) and grants to establish new research groups (the FOCUS programme).

It is in the interests of the EU as a whole to put pressure on Poland and other CEE countries to modernise their scientific infrastructures and develop their science-based economies. By offering more investment through structural funds and the Framework Programme, the EU has leverage to insist on transparent, peer-reviewed, merit-driven appointments. We need to drop the requirement for *habilitation* and create a tenure-track career ladder for new recruits, encouraging more young people onto the faculties of universities. The European Research Council's grants should help to establish Poland's international competitiveness and this should be pursued vigorously by creating new international research centres in the country. These new centres should make their priority to attract Polish expatriates and other scientists from abroad, taking their lead from the emerging Asian nations' examples.

In the meantime, I am convinced that excellent young researchers striving for independence can already find attractive options for their future in Poland if they are ready to compete for positions and funds. In this respect, Poland is no different from Western Europe or the United States where competition has long been an inherent part of a scientific life. During communist rule in Poland, there was no regular system of investigator-driven, project-based grants and the government distributed its rather limited funds to all scientific institutions independent of their achievements. Now, there are procedures for the evaluation of institutes, which translate into greater finan-

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cial support for the best places. Individual researchers or groups can apply for grants from Polish and foreign sources but they have to be ready to undergo a merit-based assessment of their track record and future potential. Those who are successful can find

similar conditions in Poland to those they have experienced at Western institutions. Most importantly, Poles working abroad must start to consider returning home; for who will push for changes in Polish science if we all stay away?



Marta Miaczynska

is head of the Laboratory of Cell Biology at the International Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Warsaw, Poland. She is an international senior fellow of the Wellcome Trust and an international scholar of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI).

ELSO's Career Development Committee

A Helping Hand

by Carol Featherstone and Margarete Heck

ELSO's Career Development Committee (CDC) is a group of around a dozen members at all stages on the scientific career ladder who are working together through ELSO to improve career opportunities for life scientists in Europe. The CDC organizes a range of activities at each ELSO congress and it has various ongoing projects running throughout the year.

The CDC was created very soon after the inauguration of ELSO and the committee members got together for the first time at the ELSO congress in 2000. It owes its inception very much to

the vision and determination of Italian cell biologist Daniela Corda, who brought together the first committee members under the guidance of Zena Werb, the chairperson of the Women in Cell Biology Committee of the American Society for Cell Biology.

The first committee included Mary Osborn and Nancy Lane, both respected senior scientists who were also centrally involved in Women in Science exercises in Europe and the UK – Osborn with the European Commission (EC)'s ETAN report

and Lane with the UK's Athena Project – so they naturally gave the CDC a strong interest in supporting women in science. However, the mixed-gender committee (there were two men, Robert Insall and Alex Pintzas, among the dozen-or-so original members) was united in its desire to gear its activities to the advancement of both women and men.

Due to its mix of junior and more senior scientists, during its early years the CDC was able to target its activities towards influencing science policy in

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Europe. In 2001, the CDC organized a letter-writing campaign to lobby Members of the European Parliament about the creation of a career development award in Framework Programme (FP)6, which contributed to the introduction of the Marie Curie 'Excellent Teams' award. Corda established a constructive dialogue with Raffaele Liberali, then Director of the EC's Marie Curie human resources programme. She helped to shape the Marie Curie activities in FP6 and has remained involved in the 'people' part of FP7 since her tenure on the CDC ended in 2004.