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Germany goes interdisciplinary

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Three interdisciplinary research programs that focus on biology and medicine are to be among the main beneficiaries of €363 million of extra cash from the German Research Foundation (DFG) next year.

Researchers focusing on the dynamics of macromolecular complexes in biosynthetic transport, on the brain, memory, and learning, as well as on membrane microdomains are to gain from up to 12 years of funding under a special DFG program.

One of the DFG's most ambitious initiatives, the 'special program' is geared toward ensuring that leading research-intensive German universities have sufficient funds to undertake interdisciplinary research of an international standing - often in alliance with other institutions and business. Funding for a full 12 years depends on a research assessment exercise carried out every 4 years.

Felix Wieland, the head of the Biochemistry Center at Heidelberg University, said that the DFG grant to study biosynthetic transport would strengthen Heidelberg's position as one of Germany's leading authorities on molecular biology and foster increased links with companies in the area.

He said that an additional nine postdocs, 33 doctoral students, and about 14 technical staff would be supported by the DFG grant of €2 million a year for the next 4 years.

Altogether, 150 people working in various faculties and institutes belonging to Heidelberg University - including the Center for Molecular Biology - will be contributing their knowledge and skills to the interdisciplinary project, he said.

"Many of the group leaders are also good friends," Wieland, whose research project focuses on vesicular transport, told us. "We often meet to chat about science, and when we heard the news, we opened a few bottles of champagne."

Noting that many good research projects had been turned down by the DFG because of a lack of funds, he said that more money was needed in Germany both from public and private sources.

Wieland also fiercely criticized the European Union's system of allocating research grants. "The EU sums, which are often huge, are given in a bureaucratic way which inhibits research," he said. "Research topics should be defined by the researchers themselves and not by the politicians, as happens in the EU. This forces researchers to bend their topics to fit the form required by the EU."

Wieland stressed that merit alone should determine whether a research project gets funding. "The US National Institutes of Health does not define the research fields in advance, but allows researchers to apply for funds with whatever project they chose, a much better system," he said.

Memory, learning, and the brain are to be the focus of a second DFG-funded collaborative research project among Mannheim University, the German Cancer Research Institute, and the Max Planck Institute for Medical Research.

Project coordinator Herta Flor from Mannheim University said that its long-term goal is to identify ways of treating learning difficulties.

Posts for about 23 postdoctoral students and 27 doctoral students will be created by the DFG grant, Christiane Hermann from the Department of Clinical Psychology at Mannheim University told us.

A third DFG special grant was awarded to the universities of Regensburg, Dresden, and Heidelberg for interdisciplinary research on membrane microdomains.

Irena Uhlig, research project manager from Regensburg University, told us that about 25 new posts are expected to be created with the extra money.

The DFG awarded grants amounting to €363 million to fund research at 61 universities as well as 264 special programs for next year.

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