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Mattaj outlines EMBL goals

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[Iain Mattaj](#), who was named last week as the next director general of the [European Molecular Biology Laboratory](#) (EMBL), says that one of his top priorities will be to incorporate computational methods into the EMBL system.

Mattaj, currently scientific director of the Heidelberg, Germany - headquartered EMBL, will take over the top post next May, when the term of the current director general [Fotis C. Kafatos](#) ends.

In an interview with us, Mattaj said that EMBL plans to combine detailed, quantitative, reductionist research with the synthetic approach of systems analysis. To achieve this goal, he said: "The essential key is to incorporate computational methods into as many of our activities as possible."

EMBL, a basic research institute funded by 16 European nations and Israel, is divided into five units: the main laboratory in Heidelberg, and what it calls "outstations" in Hinxton (the European Bioinformatics Institute), Grenoble, Hamburg, and Monterotondo near Rome. Research is conducted by around 80 independent groups covering the spectrum of molecular biology.

Mattaj, born in Scotland in 1952, was trained in the United Kingdom and Switzerland. He joined EMBL in 1985, becoming a unit leader in 1990 and EMBL scientific director in 1999. EMBL's Governing Council [tabbed Mattaj for the top position](#) last Tuesday (June 29) at a meeting in Rome. When Mattaj assumes the position in May, he will be only the fourth director general since EMBL was founded in 1974.

Asked what he believes his greatest challenges will be as head of the EMBL, Mattaj first said: "To engage the scientific communities in the member states with EMBL, so that they feel EMBL belongs to them and is not a competitor to the national research efforts." He added: "And also to create sufficient communication between the [EMBL] sites so that horizontal initiatives between the units of the laboratory are driven in a bottom-up, not a top-down, way."

Mattaj said that his third major challenge would be "to develop research, service and training programs that are of high enough quality that the [17 EMBL] member states can be proud to fund them."

When asked whether he was satisfied with current EMBL funding levels, Mattaj responded like a true scientist - and an administrator skilled in the art of diplomacy. "I'd naturally welcome an increase in budget to reflect the enormous vitality of EMBL, and the life sciences in general," he said. "But the funding levels for the years after 2005 have not yet been discussed with the member states."

Mattaj said he was confident that EMBL remains the top molecular biology and genetics research center in Europe, a claim supported by a recent Institute for Scientific Information study evaluating the number and quality of publications by top research institutes worldwide in molecular biology and genetics.

"The results of this study clearly indicated EMBL as Europe's highest impact research center," Mattaj said.

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