

## SCIENCE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

tium will seek foreign partners to provide know-how and the financial guarantees. PIAS will eventually move into the science park if things go to plan. "We have proved we can do it without the active help of the government", says Pechan, but the whole thing could have progressed much faster and on a grander scale if the government had been behind them.

There is a small chance, however, that things may change: a few weeks ago, Maria Stiborova, vice-chairperson of the parliamentary left-wing block and a mem-

ber of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee, has tabled a formal question to government asking why the report, which cost ECU500,000 has been confined to a drawer. Pechan is not holding his breath for a change in government heart. Equally he is not going to give up. The five years he had mentally allocated to his project are running out, but he will probably stay a couple of years longer to see PIAS finally functioning inside a thriving science park. "I don't like to give up halfway," he says. **A.A.**

and thought he would never have the opportunity to do molecular biology again after his return to Prague in 1992. But he has found the chance at the new centre.

The centre's facilities have been built up with support from the Heidelberg-based European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). The tale is that one of EMBL's senior scientists, Wilhelm Ansorge, a graduate of Charles University awarded one of three chairs sponsored by the European Union, was encouraged to spend as much time as needed to establish a high-standard laboratory in Prague.

The European chairs, administered by the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, provide salary for one year and generous equipment grants (ECU150,000) to a scientist in Western Europe to promote high quality research at a university in central eastern Europe.

Elleder is enormously grateful. "It is very important to have someone we can turn to", he says. Ansorge travels frequently to Prague, often bringing young scientists from EMBL with him to contribute practically. But he is not complacent: "I would like to be optimistic, but I realize there is still a lot before us", he says. The biggest problem is one of attitude; people grew accustomed to how things were under communism and are afraid of change."

Elleder still prefers to keep a relatively low profile, conscious of the time-consuming and frustrating nature of university politics. His only concession is his acceptance of the position of vice-dean for the new PhD programme at Charles University.

The Czech Republic is about to abandon the old Candidate of Sciences degree which, says Elleder, was more of a professional qualification than a true research degree. He wants subject areas of PhDs to centre on pathogenesis and therefore advance basic knowledge, and to exclude routine subjects such as surgery.

His remaining ambition is to establish a graduate school in the medical faculty. He has support from the university rector's office, and from Emanuel Ondráček, vice-minister for universities and research, but the plan must be voted through the more conservative academic senate, which is not enthusiastic, fearing that it would allow too great a concentration of power.

Elleder will spend as much time as necessary making sure the graduate school becomes a reality and that standards of PhD work remain high. He is conscious of the opportunities and freedom that now exist and which, he believes, should not be allowed to slip away. When he applied to go to university at 17, the authorities noted that he was from a bourgeois family and sent him to work in a factory for a year "to get to know workers". His own son at the same age was able to go to school in the United States on a year's exchange. **A.A.**

## Clinical efficiency

**Prague.** Milan Elleder, who is a clinical biochemist, always wanted to combine research with his teaching activities at the Charles University medical school. He let nothing stand in his way, not even the dismal environment created by the communists antipathy towards research.

Since his appointment to the medical school's institute of pathology in 1964, Elleder has always kept a few research projects going, often initiating collaborations with his clinical colleagues. For 25 years he kept a low profile: "I hated the communist system and never tried to get into a position where I had to ask those guys for promotion", he says.

Unlike many in a similar situation, Elleder did not take sanctuary at the Academy of Sciences. He chose to stay at the university, because he enjoyed the contact with the clinic and with students.

He was not allowed to go abroad, but learnt English via correspondence with scientists in the West. This was tolerated, though the authorities "hoped the letters concerned only science".

Now Elleder has nearly everything he wanted. Last June he was made head of the newly established Centre for Inherited Metabolic Diseases, which combines the university hospital's diagnostic unit with his own expanding research laboratory. With West European help, he is moving away from enzymatic analysis of metabolic disorders towards molecular analysis.

The centre has a core of 12 scientists — six in diagnosis and six in research. Elleder is delighted to have attracted several young members of staff to the centre. Thirty-four-year-old Viktor Kožich, for example, spent two years at the University of Colorado, "a wonderful part of my life",

## Why be a scientist?

A RECENT opinion poll in the Czech Republic revealed that science is regarded as the fourth most admired profession. This is a surprise, and perhaps an indication that the star may once again be rising for researchers.

Science was a fashionable career under communism. Indeed, science was regarded — and loudly hailed — as a major pillar on which communist societies are founded. But with the collapse of the old regime, scientists began to be regarded with suspicion. Worse, pseudoscience began to flourish, and continues to flourish: there is a suspicion that, having been banned under communism, it must be good.

To make things worse, the state offers scientists miserable wages. There is virtually no unemployment in Prague, and much more can be earned in the private sector. So it is not hard to imagine the difficulties scientists face in trying to persuade bright young students to turn to a career in research.

Scientists at the academy are allowed to spend up to 50 per cent of their time working elsewhere to supplement their

income, but that is not a satisfactory solution. Instead, to regenerate their ageing stock, the only hope for research institutes is to fire their young students with enthusiasm.

One way is to use the many opportunities in the Czech Republic to send young students abroad to study. Around half of the republic's postgraduate students have travelled abroad under the European Union Tempus scheme. They come back liberated. "You can always tell which students have been abroad", says Jiří Veleminský, head of the Institute of Experimental Botany in Prague, "because they answer you back, and criticize you."

By contrast, the usual Czech student has been taught to be passive. Martina Rothova, a research student at Charles University's department of botany, has made several trips to Munich to learn molecular biology techniques. She has been amazed at the helpful attitude and enthusiasm for science she has found at the Max Planck Institute for Biochemistry. "You don't get this at home", she says. □