

Berlin university shakes off radical past . . .

[BERLIN] The Free University in Berlin, which celebrates its fiftieth birthday next month, is engaged in major reforms to eliminate the excesses in teaching and research that have been a legacy of its turbulent history.

The university was established in 1948 in the British sector of occupied Berlin when students in the west of the city were denied access to the University of Berlin (now Humboldt University) in the Russian sector.

Generous subsidies from the federal government meant the university grew rapidly. Its isolation from the rest of West Germany encouraged an independent spirit to flourish, and this was responsible for many radical changes following the student protest movements of 1968.

With a post-reunification decision to halve its size, however, those running the university are taking the opportunity to reverse many of these changes and introduce new rules to improve its research and teaching performance.

"The Free University was a playground for experiments in education and science policy, and all the errors made [in Germany] are nowhere more apparent," says Peter Gaetgens, the university's vice-president.

Under pressure from students in the late 1960s, the number of exams was reduced, while low attendance at lectures lengthened the average study time to eight years. Inward-looking recruitment practices weakened research, assistant professors being promoted to full professors with few of the normal rules governing academic selection.

As a result, the number of faculty mem-

bers soared, while the quality of research was diluted. "In the rush of hiring, too many professors came on board who were never productive in research," says Gaetgens.

Not all departments suffered equally. Physics avoided the excesses of the period, maintaining a strong research profile and recruiting good professors from outside.

Biology suffered more. This large department, with 46 chairs, became mired in internal disputes. The 'democratization' of faculty committees left professors in a minority, while conflicts between political ideologies distracted academics from research.

Neuroscientist Randolph Menzel, one of the few biologists hired from outside Berlin during the 1970s, says "the Free University got so much money thrown at it through the 1970s and 1980s that it never developed a culture of competition". Even now, he says, "some of the biology faculty won't accept publication record as an indication of research success".

But with the country's reunification in 1990, the flow of money stopped, and the Free University found itself with few friends in high places. It fought to maintain its operational style with an unsympathetic Berlin Ministry for Science and Research (see *Nature* 370, 167; 1994). But in the last couple of years the university has accepted the new reality and begun serious and deep reforms.

Teaching is being improved and regularly evaluated, and students are given more frequent exams and are encouraged to complete their studies in four years.

Steps have also been taken to improve the

quality of research, with reorganization made possible by a change in university rules putting more decision-making power in the hands of deans and rectors, at the expense of faculty committees. Already time spent in committee meetings is reduced. According to a commonly quoted calculation, this used to cost the university DM3 million (US\$1.8 million) per year in academics' time.

To adapt to its smaller size, the Free University has redesigned its internal structure, with fewer, broader, faculties. Chemistry, biology and pharmacy have been grouped in a new life sciences faculty to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas. But not everyone is happy. Inorganic chemists worry that they will be marginalized in a life sciences faculty.

Most departments have started to allocate their own research funds in line with performance, based on the amount of external grants already won: unproductive professors get nothing.

The university still has many relatively unproductive professors. A ranking of universities by grant money won between 1991 and 1995 places it fifth among 68 universities funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Germany's university research grant agency. When recalculated on a per professor basis, it falls to number 36. On this basis, it is eighteenth out of 59 in the natural sciences, and thirty-fourth out of 51 in biology and medicine.

On the other hand, the university receives an above average number (nine) of the DFG's coveted 12–15-year grants (*Sonderforschungsbereiche*), and nine researchers at the Free University have won the DFG's prestigious Leibniz awards, showing that pockets of research excellence exist, without which the university's ranking would be yet lower.

The university is trying to build on this excellence and clear its dead wood by waiting for the large number of professors hired in the 1970s to retire, and replacing them with active and successful researchers. But for the large cut in faculty numbers — by 2003 the number of chairs funded by the Berlin government will fall from 750 to 360 — this would be easy. The 1970s professors are approaching retirement *en masse*, and Berlin has become an attractive place for scientists to live and work.

The university's community of active researchers say that the large-scale cuts forced on the Free University by circumstance have been healthy rather than damaging because of the urgently needed reforms they precipitated.

"At first we thought that the big tanker that is the Free University could not be turned," says Günther Kaindl, a professor of solid state physics. "But it seems that it was mobile after all."

Alison Abbott

... and hopes for the gift of a new home



[BERLIN] The Free University is hoping for a fiftieth birthday present — the nearby barracks (above) which was the US Army headquarters until the end of the Cold War.

Founded at the start of the Cold War, the university grew haphazardly among villas vacated after World

War II in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem. History dictated its lack of a real centre.

"It would be a nice symbol of our future if the new government gave us the buildings", says Peter Gaetgens. "The years 1948, 1968 and 1990 were important cornerstones of

our history, but they are the past."

The government of Berlin supports the idea. But the federal government is as yet undecided. It is toying with the idea of moving the German secret service into the buildings instead.

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