



## EMBL Monterotondo Unit Review 2016

EMBL Monterotondo was reviewed on the 16 to 18 March 2016 by a panel of 13 experts, including four members of SAC and two observers from EMBL Council. The review was chaired by Denis Duboule, Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne, and University of Geneva, Switzerland.

### Evaluation Summary

EMBL Monterotondo has seen some important changes over the last review period, both in terms of staff turnover and of research themes. Traditionally, EMBL Monterotondo hosted research groups working on a wide variety of topics, yet all relying upon the mouse as a model system. This was associated with the role played by the Monterotondo campus on the European mouse biology scene, for example through the presence of the European Mouse Mutant Archive (EMMA). With the appointment of a new Head of Outstation, Phil Avner, the decision was taken to develop a narrower scientific focus and to utilise the EMBL entire environment to implement the use of the latest technologies involving mouse molecular genetics, genome editing, bioinformatics and imaging to help EMBL Monterotondo develop further its profile as a centre of excellence in the European landscape.

It was decided to focus on neurobiology, epigenetics and their interactions in the nervous system using *in vivo* approaches based on cutting-edge mouse genome modification techniques. Since the Head of EMBL Monterotondo is not a neurobiologist, an external committee with an advisory role was formed to help implement this ambitious programme. The review committee validated the feasibility and encouraged the development of a strong mouse-oriented neurobiology unit at EMBL Monterotondo.

Within this refocused research framework, two new Group Leaders have been recruited, following the departure of two Staff Scientists and one Group Leader and the relocation of another Group Leader to EMBL Heidelberg. Two further recruitments are planned that should bring the Monterotondo Outstation back to eight research groups during 2017.

The science carried out by EMBL Monterotondo has continued to be of a very high standard: the overall performance of the Unit was rated by the Review Panel as excellent in terms of the quality of its research. Part of this scientific excellence relies on the presence of strong core services, which overall have maintained and improved their service provision to the Unit over the period 2012–2016. Technical excellence, particularly in the area of genetic engineering and transgenesis, will continue to be an important asset in the context of the changing research focus of EMBL Monterotondo. In view of a potential moderate increase in the number of research groups at EMBL Monterotondo in the future, the Panel stressed the need for continued improvement in the management of the animal facility so as to better adapt to customer requests.

The Panel also recommended that training and outreach activities for the scientific community be redefined to better fit with the new thematic focus of the Unit, possibly also serving as a means to build or improve relationships with Italian institutes and the Italian community of researchers.

As the Head of EMBL Monterotondo, Phil Avner was congratulated for his smooth and efficient running of the Unit over the past four years. His management skills and commitment to the Unit's success were unanimously appreciated and his performance was rated as outstanding.



## Response to the Panel's Recommendations

I would like to begin by thanking the Panel for their thorough review of the activities of the Monterotondo Outstation, as well as for their constructive feedback. Each of the Group Leaders under review received a detailed critique and helpful suggestions from the Panel. I agree with the evaluation that Phil Avner has performed in an outstanding way by shaping and driving forward the activities of EMBL Monterotondo through a crucial and very delicate phase for the Outstation, with very dedicated and useful support from Senior Scientist Cornelius Gross.

The strategic decision to move towards an increased focus on neurobiology and epigenetics was viewed very positively by the Panel. The requirement for a narrower focus to succeed as a small Outstation is an opinion that I completely share and thus I am very happy to acknowledge the endorsement of the Panel. It was pointed out that the Group Leader recruitments planned for the near future should be leveraged as an opportunity to acquire expertise in areas of neurobiology complementary to those currently represented within the Unit, while at the same time exploiting EMBL Monterotondo's strengths in genetic and epigenetic regulation and in the generation and use of genetically engineered mouse models. I note and agree with the Panel's recommendation, and trust that it will be possible to identify excellent candidates with the right profile in the upcoming rounds of recruitment.

The Panel also recommended that special attention be given to the establishment of a better balance between genders at the faculty level in order to correct the current situation, which is characterised by the absence of a single female Group Leader. Both I and the management of EMBL Monterotondo are very aware of this problem, which we consider of the utmost importance. Ongoing and future search committees will consider this issue very seriously, and specific approaches to identify and attract qualified women have been implemented.

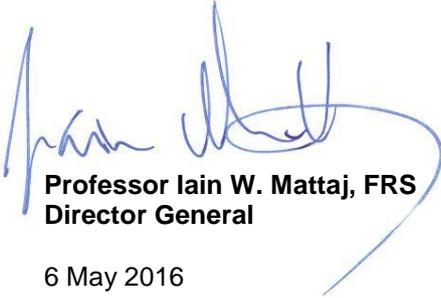
While noting a more equal distribution of grants amongst the individual Group Leaders in the Unit relative to the previous review period, the Panel felt that the overall level of external funding obtained by the groups at EMBL Monterotondo was low. While I agree that it is desirable to raise more external funding I point out that there are almost no opportunities for Outstation Group Leaders to access Italian national funding schemes and that the Health Directorate of the European Commission, previously a major supporter of health-related research utilising the mouse model, has essentially stopped funding such research. Thus, apart from the ERC funding schemes, where the Unit has been successful, there are in fact very few opportunities for external funding.

A major concern in previous reviews of EMBL Monterotondo has been the limited interaction between the Unit and the Italian scientific community. As noted by the Panel, the situation in this respect has improved to some extent over the last four years thanks to new programmes and activities specifically promoted by the Unit leadership. While acknowledging and strongly supporting these initiatives, the Panel recommended that efforts be further intensified to create new and strengthen existing links with the Italian research community and to ensure the successful integration of EMBL Monterotondo in the surrounding scientific landscape. Several useful suggestions were provided, which I will discuss and follow up on with the Unit leadership.

It was the opinion of the Panel that mentoring of young Group Leaders within the Unit should be strengthened. This is an element of concern, particularly for young Group Leaders who, due to the timing of their recruitment, only undergo a full review several years into their tenure at EMBL. Following very fruitful discussions with the Panel during the review, I have consulted with EMBL scientific leadership and decided to establish an additional mechanism to recruit external expert mentors to advise (rather than evaluate) young EMBL Group Leaders on their research and career strategies. A detailed plan regarding the frequency and format of such meetings is being developed by a committee chaired by Cornelius Gross.



Finally, the predoctoral fellows on site reported on a lack of communication with the management of the Unit. Although the review inadvertently identified this as an issue, whereas the fellows had in fact failed to bring items that were of concern to them to the attention of management through any of the multiple existing routes of communication (direct discussion with or e-mail to either local or central EMBL management, the PhD and postdoctoral programme managers, the EMBL Staff Association, the Ombudsperson, etc.), I will ensure that the local Outstation management actively pursues this matter.



**Professor Iain W. Mattaj, FRS**  
**Director General**

6 May 2016