

German researchers tour Canada's big centre of little science

by Heiren Byles

March 20, 2007 - Edmonton - Some of Europe's biggest minds in the world of small are on the University of Alberta campus this week.

More than 15 scientists and students from Germany's Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU) and the associated Centre for Nanoscience (CENS) have been attending the first Winter School in Nanoscience, hosted by the University of Alberta and the National Research Council's National Institute for Nanotechnology.

"In Europe, Germany is viewed as the leading place for nanoscience and nanotechnology," said Renny Khan, associate director of international relations for University of Alberta International.

"From our perspective, we're connecting with the very best and they're looking for opportunities for their scientists and trying to expand their connections to leading centres. It further strengthens our international network and it shows to the international research community that we are a major player in this field."

The visitors, along with researchers and U of A doctoral and post-doctoral students, will spend a total of 10 days attending lectures, comparing research and forming important connections. It's a process CENS has been using for more than eight years in Germany, said Marie-Christine Blüm, scientific manager at CENS.

"CENS doesn't have a separate facility at LMU. We're more of a virtual network of scientists and researchers," she said. "We try to bring them together at winter schools and summer schools and the direct outcome is that people start collaborating. You see different groups get together to publish articles."

When asked what he'd like to take home from Canada, Jochen Feldmann, vice-rector of research at LMU and a chairholder with CENS, laughed, "Your building!"

"First of all NINT, in terms of this building and equipment and possibilities, is really impressive. I don't know of any nanotechnology centre in Germany which has such a nice building as you have. It must be heaven to work here, that's my first impression. I met some really brilliant scientists here; you've got everything you need."

And with eight years of experience in fostering interdisciplinary work, Feldmann is convinced that's the best way to reach technological goals.

"CENS has been successful, even without such a building because it tries to provide a network for people, a culture for young researchers to support them, to motivate them, to show them career options in science and industry," he said. "Open all the doors and let the people talk to each other, that's the way to do great research. My personal view is that the more open you are, the more you'll get out of it."

CENS is an institution focused on the fundamental science of nano, said Feldmann,

NINT's approach, while interdisciplinary, is different, says NINT director Nils Petersen.

"I often do say that we're the National Institute for Nanotechnology and not the National Institute for Nanoscience, precisely because we have a mandate to stimulate economic development in this region," he said. "So clearly, a lot of what we try to do as an organization is to understand where the applications are."



A contingent of German scientists and students visited the U of A campus and NINT for a Winter School of Nanotechnology.

We are a hybrid organization. Because we're not just a university institute but also a National Research Council institute, we have a dual purpose to do some really good science and, at the same time, be really focused and directed in various parts of the nanotechnology world."

Approaching the field of nanotechnology from such different vantages may make for some easy co-operation, however, said Petersen.

"We're not just like them, so we can learn from them and they can learn from us. We try to seek out partners that are really complimentary to the work we're doing here," he said, adding that the winter school has fulfilled a three-fold purpose, including encouraging U of A researchers to learn about each other's work and to get familiar with the idea of having a co-ordinated program of delivery around a nanoschool.

"The other thing we've accomplished is to get their students and our students to really interact and get to know each other. I think that's really the core of these types of relationships - to get the young scientists to meet each other and learn from each other."

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