

Case study
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University of
Cambridge

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Binding teams together

The two-hour journey to Harwell is one that biochemist Professor Sir Thomas Blundell and his team already know well. Accessing the powerful imaging facilities on the campus has become an essential part of the work on a range of diseases being studied by the multidisciplinary group he leads at the University of Cambridge.

The Rosalind Franklin Institute, however, is offering them an opportunity to be involved in delivering “game changing” advances in how cell biology and biochemistry can be studied. Professor Blundell believes that in order to continue what has been described as the “resolution revolution” in fields such as cryogenic electron microscopy, it will be necessary for institutions to work together.

As part of the Structural Biology theme advisory panel, Professor Blundell has played a key role in helping to determine which technologies The Franklin will focus on. The Franklin, in his eyes, offers opportunities to develop technologies for the life sciences that would be impossible for any institution or team to do alone.

“The revolution in cryogenic electron microscopy has been a very fast changing one,” he says. “We are lucky enough to have our own equipment in Cambridge, but we still need to have a central facility to keep the technology moving forward.”

Professor Blundell and his team’s involvement in The Franklin has already brought other benefits, helping them to strengthen their ties with other research teams around the country. For example, his group has been working with Professor Frank von Delft from the University of Oxford and leader of the XChem facility on the Harwell Campus, as part of a drug design project being developed in collaboration with The Franklin.

Professor Blundell, sees the greatest value of The Franklin, however, being the way it opens up cutting edge technologies to the wider research community.

“We are not going to be able to get new technologies on every campus, so I feel these things need to be done centrally so we can get a critical mass of people working together on new equipment and techniques,” he says.

Other researchers at the University of Cambridge have also played a key role in determining the direction that The Franklin is headed. Professor Kathryn Lilley, from Cambridge’s Department of Biochemistry, was until recently the programme co-lead in Biological Mass Spectrometry, for example.

The University’s expertise in many of The Franklin’s themes also means there is great potential for more involvement in the future, says Professor Chris Abell, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research at the University of Cambridge and member representative at The Franklin.

“Personally, I’ve been very impressed by the quality of people that have been involved,” he says. “As a national facility, the Franklin will be able to buy the big pieces of kit that universities by themselves cannot afford and develop great tools for basic research.”



Professor Chris Abell,
Pro-Vice Chancellor for
Research



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