US universities

Commercial interest*Washington*

Legislation passed last year by the US Congress to encourage the scientific community to take a greater interest in the commercial exploitation of their research — for example by giving universities and small businesses the right to patents resulting from federally-sponsored research — is already bearing fruit. Spurred by the new patent laws, Stanford University is considering whether to invest university funds in companies set up by faculty members to exploit their research. And the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are expected to reverse a 20-year-old policy which excludes scientists who work for profit-making companies from applying for competitive research grants.

At the same time, there are renewed pressures in Congress for legislation to offer private corporations tax incentives for supporting basic research in universities. One attraction for the universities stems from the increasing constraints on federal funding, but industrial support for university research — at present only about 3 per cent of the total — is unlikely to become a substitute for the federal government.

New NASA man*Washington*

The Reagan Administration is expected to announce shortly the appointment of Dr James Beggs, at present executive vice-president for aerospace at General Dynamics Corporation, to be the next administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Dr Beggs was NASA's associate administrator for advanced research and technology in the late 1960's and before joining General Dynamics had acted as Under-Secretary in the Department of Energy. His name was informally mentioned by Vice-President George Bush during a visit to the Kennedy Space Centre last week, and a formal announcement about Dr Beggs's nomination is expected from the White House this week.

Meanwhile there is still no news about the post of science adviser and director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). A decision by the White House to include funds for OSTP in its budget request for 1982 indicates that no official decision has yet been made to eliminate the office or its activities. However, there are several rumours in Washington that the science adviser's post may be downgraded, and that OSTP could be absorbed into the Office of Management and Budget, with which it worked increasingly closely during the Carter Administration. **David Dickson**

The Stanford proposal was put to a meeting of the university's committee on research two weeks ago by Dr William Massey, professor of business administration and vice-president for business and finance. In particular, he spoke in favour of setting up a Stanford investment trust which would operate partly on capital provided by the university and partly on capital raised outside. Such a trust would make "modest" equity investments in the early financing of high-technology companies whose products derived in some way from work at Stanford.

Several scientists at the Stanford meeting, among them Dr Edward Garvin, an adjunct professor at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, were concerned about the potential impact on research activity of the new proposals, particularly if it meant that the potential ability to earn money for the university became a major factor in making research choices or faculty appointments.

At NIH, the change in rules covering applications for research grants is expected to be announced in the *Federal Register* within the next few weeks. It reverses a restriction applied to all funding by the Public Health Service in 1962, partly as an attempt to ensure that research funds were used to help build up university and medical schools, partly because of some well-publicized abuses.

A return to the situation of before 1962, which would not require ratification by Congress since the decision was essentially administrative, has been under discussion for several years. The document setting out the change in procedures is now said to be awaiting merely the signature of Health Secretary Mr Richard Schweiker, who is not expected to raise significant objections.

The legislation had some important administrative implications. For example, changes in the patent law now required NIH to keep track of all patents awarded to universities from federally-sponsored research, in order that the institutions should be able to exercise "march-in rights" if they consider that a patent is not being sufficiently exploited.

Dr Charles Lowe, head of the institutes' Office of Medical Applications of Research, warned that such changes could have important implications, and steps might be necessary, for example, to protect the integrity of the peer review process. His warnings were echoed by Dr Philip Siekevitz, professor of cell biology at Rockefeller University in New York, who said there was a danger that biomedical research priorities would be shifted from social need to return on investment.

Dr Donald Fredrickson, director of NIH, said he expected that many of the changes described by Dr Lowe would come about and that NIH would in particular be looking closely at the experiences of the National Science Foundation in forging ties between industry and universities.

David Dickson

UK astronomy

Change of direction

Responsibility for the construction of the La Palma observatory in the Canary Islands, Britain's hope for good optical astronomy in the Northern Hemisphere, will be handed over to Professor Alexander Boksenberg, now professor of physics at University College London, on 1 October. Professor Boksenberg will then succeed Professor F. Graham Smith as director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, which is responsible for building and subsequently operating the La Palma site. Professor Smith, a radioastronomer, will succeed Sir Bernard Lovell as professor of radio astronomy at the University of Manchester and director of the Jodrell Bank radiotelescope.

The La Palma observatory, which will house four major telescopes, is likely to be the Greenwich observatory's largest project for a long time to come. The Science Research Council, which made the new appointment, hopes that one of Professor Boksenberg's first tasks will be to chivy the Spanish authorities, who have been responsible for some delay, into speedier action. But Professor Boksenberg sees his main task as encouraging astronomers in British universities to take the fullest possible part in the new observatory. He would like to see their involvement extend beyond the use of the telescopes for observation to the design of instruments and software, either in their own laboratories or at the Greenwich Herstmonceux site.

Since the Royal Greenwich Observatory took on the construction of the La Palma observatory, its own research effort has gradually diminished, a trend that Professor Boksenberg would like to see reversed. He hopes to encourage more astronomers to join his organization and, by collaboration with universities and Britain's other major observatory, the Royal Observatory Edinburgh, to transform the astronomy community into "a happy family".

Professor Boksenberg's previous experience seems particularly relevant to an organization involved in both instrument-building and astronomical research. His expertise in building image intensifying instruments has won him collaboration on several major worldwide telescopes. The image photon counting system, his big success, earned him observation time on the Kitt Peak and Palomar Mountain Observatories in the United States. He is at present building instruments for the faint object camera, Europe's contribution to the space telescope.

His observations have been mainly extragalactic, of quasars in particular. As well as using groundbased optical telescopes, he has also worked with data from and designed instruments for the