

Scientific exchanges

DoD retreat*Washington*

Following a series of protests from the academic community, the US State Department has backed away from its previous insistence that rigid restrictions be placed on the topics that a Soviet computer scientist will be allowed to discuss with American scientists during his visit to various research universities later this year.

Last month Stanford University told the State Department that it was not prepared to accept limitations on a visit to its department of mechanical engineering by Dr Nickolay V. Umnov, a robotics specialist. In particular, the university objected to the requirement that Dr Umnov should only be shown research results that have already appeared in the open literature, only discuss theoretical aspects of the research and not be shown details of robot control units or programming techniques.

Stanford's dean of research, Dr Gerald Liebermann, said the university was not prepared to police Dr Umnov's visit, either on or off the campus. He also expressed surprise that the State Department's restrictions had been forwarded without comment by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), which is arranging Dr Umnov's visit as part of its conventional scientific exchange programme.

NAS president Dr Frank Press subsequently announced that the academy was suspending the automatic transmission of such instructions until the matter had been discussed in detail with the State Department. And last week, Stanford announced that the department had "clarified" its instructions, producing a revised form of the restrictions which the university would now be able to accept.

In particular, Dr Umnov would be able to discuss any research that either has been or is about to be published in scientific papers, and also be given access to details about the control units and programming techniques. In addition, Stanford would no longer be responsible for ensuring that he did not visit local industrial research facilities, another restriction included in the earlier letter.

After the State Department's clarification, the University of Wisconsin, which had previously withdrawn an invitation to Dr Umnov in the wake of Stanford's protest, also announced that it found the new conditions acceptable and Dr Umnov could now visit the university.

The softening of the State Department's line follows intense discussions involving both Stanford and the National Academy of Sciences. It also reflects a split within the Administration on the advantages to be gained from the strict control of university-based research, given the disruption of the free flow of scientific information that would result.

Critics in both Congress and the Administration have identified scientific exchange programmes as vehicles by which the Soviet Union is able to gain access to technical data which it is then able to use to bolster its own military efforts. In response, universities such as Stanford argue that this is a small price to pay for the advantages of open communication in the scientific community.

Dr Jay Keyworth, President Reagan's science adviser, said in an interview last week that he thought the tightening up of the restrictions applied to visiting Soviet scientists was more a reflection of the efforts by President Reagan to make access for the Soviet Union to US technology more difficult after recent events in Poland than a specific attempt to restrict the export of technical data on robotics.

Although Stanford has now said that it is prepared to accept Dr Umnov's visit under the revised restrictions from the State

Department, the department itself has yet to give formal approval to the visit. The university has described the National Academy as acting as an "honest broker" between itself and the department.

The academy's position will be discussed at a meeting of its governing board and of the National Research Council which takes place in Washington next week. Academy officials are still hoping to set up a committee to examine the tensions between national security and academic freedom in greater depth. Meanwhile, Stanford president Dr Donald Kennedy, one of the public leaders of the academic community's campaign against excessive government restrictions on research, has agreed to act as chairman with Dr Richard DeLauer, Under-Secretary of Defense for research and development, of a committee being established by the Association of American Universities, to address the same topic.

David Dickson

Lister Institute**End of the road**

At the end of May, the Lister Institute of Preventive Medicine will announce the results of applications for five newly created research fellowships thus marking the fundamental change in its status that has now been accomplished. Inflation and escalating costs over the past ten years have defeated the institute's struggle to support a research programme with its investments and production facilities. The laboratories at Elstree and Chelsea have been sold and the interest from the institute's capital of £6 million will now be used for the fellowships.

The Lister Institute was the first major medical research body in Britain, pre-dating the Medical Research Council by 30 years, and in its early days ranked with institutes such as the Pasteur and the Rockefeller. When established in 1891, the institute had a dual function — the production of vaccines and antitoxins and medical research. In spite of passionate opposition from anti-vivisectionists, the institute enlisted the sympathy of the first Lord Iveagh, who after his stableman was bitten by a rabid dog and was sent to Pasteur in Paris because no treatment could be procured in England, gave it £250,000. (The stableman lived to the ripe old age of 89.) In its early decades, the Lister Institute flourished as a private research organization with endowments and income from the sale of biomedical products.

By 1952, the institute encompassed twelve departments. Research was concentrated at the Chelsea laboratory, which closed in 1975 and is now being developed as a hospital. The sale of biomedical products contributed greatly to the income of the institute but Elstree laboratories, the production centre, was finally sold in 1978.

From 1896, when the first diphtheria antitoxin used in Britain was prepared, Elstree manufactured vaccines against tetanus, whooping cough, typhoid, plague and cholera and was the main British supplier of smallpox vaccine. Elstree also developed the dried smallpox vaccine widely used in the WHO smallpox eradication programme.

The fate of the institute reflects the difficulties of a privately funded research organization in times of inflation. The



institute repeatedly failed to obtain government support, but its Blood Products Laboratory and Blood Group Reference Laboratory have been handed over to the North West Thames Regional Health Authority.

The institute has now been reduced to a small governing body under the chairmanship of Professor Albert Neuberger, a small secretariat and a Scientific Advisory Committee chaired by Professor Geoffrey Dawes, director of the Nuffield Institute for Medical Research at Oxford. The fellowships now to be offered are aimed at promising young scientists who, in the present economic climate, may find it difficult to obtain financial backing for their research. The institute is encouraged by the response to its first advertisement — "It takes only one to make a breakthrough, after all".

Jane Wynne