

US National Science Foundation

Policy on minorities to change

Washington

SENIOR managers of the National Science Foundation (NSF) are battling against the calendar — and against some deeply entrenched personal convictions — to implement a dramatic change in the foundation's granting philosophy. A committee of assistant directors has been given until October to devise a new management plan to reconcile NSF's belief in selecting research proposals on scientific merit with its obligations to earmark some money for special groups such as women, minorities and international partners.

Until now, NSF has juggled the two roles by keeping them organizationally distinct. The heart of the foundation consists of six discipline-based research directorates, which support proposals chosen through peer review and judged on purely scientific grounds. A substantial number of special programmes, many of which are mandated by Congress and fit no particular research discipline, are grouped under a smaller Directorate for Scientific, Technological and International Affairs (STIA).

Dr Edward Knapp, NSF's director since the end of 1982, has opened a managerial Pandora's box by making the ending of this dual system one of his priorities. He maintains that the existing arrangements give NSF the worst of both worlds. Outsiders assume, often unfairly, that research sup-

ported through the specially directed programmes is scientifically inferior. Meanwhile, the existence of the directed programmes enables research directorates to take an excessively narrow view of their own interests.

Knapp told Congress earlier this year that in future the directed programmes would be shifted into the mainstream of the foundation's work. The programme officers of the research directorates would be expected to consider issues such as the support of undergraduates, minorities, women scientists and international partnerships when they were forming general plans for their disciplines.

The proposed reform has provoked a predictable barrage of protest, including some noisy criticism from Congress and more muffled arguments from within NSF itself. The House of Representatives Science and Technology Committee complained that the changes were being rushed through too rapidly and without enough planning and that the new arrangements would lead to the directed programmes simply being absorbed within the larger and less sympathetic research directorates.

Congress as a whole, however, did not support the committee's doubts. Under the 1984 budget, NSF will be allowed to begin to transfer some money out of STIA's budget and into the research directorates where, in theory, it can be spent on directed programmes. But the precise details of the new plan have not been finalized, and there are signs that disagreements within the foundation itself may result in less far-reaching changes than those originally envisaged.

One area in which Knapp's reforms are expected to be toned down is in STIA's international programme. In his initial explanation of the new approach, Knapp told Congress that STIA would relinquish its authority for peer-reviewing and selecting international research projects. STIA would remain responsible for servicing NSF's bilateral arrangements with foreign scientists, but half of its money — some \$5 million — would be transferred to the research directorates to distribute under arrangements similar to those used for domestic grants.

In a telephone interview, Mr Tom Ubois, the NSF assistant director devising the new management plan, said the foundation may decide against so radical a change. Many officials had questioned whether the research directorates could develop the expertise needed to cope with the special granting procedures that applied to some 30 bilateral international agreements operated by STIA. As a compromise, STIA might be allowed to retain its control over grants while allowing the research directorates more say in the planning of international agreements. **Peter David**

AIDS

Moral Majority intervenes

Washington

DR Jerry Falwell, the president of the Moral Majority whose Sunday morning sermons are televised and watched by millions of Americans, said last week that the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was a divine punishment visited on homosexuals for breaking the laws of nature and of God. And he accused the homosexual community in the United States of using its political influence to prevent the government from acting more quickly to stop the spread of the epidemic.

At a press conference on AIDS convened by the Moral Majority, Dr Falwell accused the federal government of failing to act against AIDS as rapidly as it had acted against legionnaires' disease, toxic shock syndrome and the poisoning of some capsules of extra-strength Tylenol last year. He



said federal health authorities should immediately close down all public bath houses, prevent homosexuals from donating blood and issue "firm guidelines" to nurses and other paramedicals responsible for handling AIDS victims.

Arguing that the sole purpose of public bath houses was to provide a setting for promiscuous homosexual sex, Dr Falwell said their closure would be analogous to the closure of some public swimming pools during the polio epidemics of the 1950s. And he claimed that while the spread of AIDS could also be checked by asking blood donors to answer extensive questionnaires detailing their sexual proclivities, Congress had shied away from such measures for fear of antagonizing the homosexual community.

Opposition to homosexuality and promiscuity, together with abstinence from alcohol, are major elements in the official programme of the Moral Majority, but Dr Falwell insisted that he felt great compassion for AIDS victims and supported more research to find the causes of the disease. Research, however, had to be accompanied by firm preventive measures to stop AIDS becoming an "uncontrollable plague" and spreading to normal Americans. **Peter David**

Axeman hesitates

BRITISH universities seem likely to suffer as a consequence of a £30 million cut in expenditure for the current financial year at the Department of Education and Science (DES). Details of where exactly the axe will fall have yet to be decided.

There will be no change in university student numbers for the coming academic year, but, in addition to the universities themselves, research councils and institutions supported directly by the department — such as the Open University — seem vulnerable. However, Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, is said to be anxious to protect "important scientific research" and, in particular, his recent "new blood" initiative — which sought to compensate for some of the ill-effects of earlier cuts. The latest cut amounts to 1 per cent of DES's science and education expenditure.

Mr John Acker of the Association of University Teachers says that any further reductions in universities' budgets would be disastrous for research and for staff morale. He is pinning his hopes on a pledge apparently made by Mrs Thatcher during the general election campaign that spending on higher education in and after 1984-85 would be held at 1983-84 levels. **Tim Beardsley**