

UK research support

Committee advocates more competition

A RADICAL change in the mechanism for supporting British universities is suggested in a report* of a committee on academic research, published last week. The proposal is that the University Grants Committee should separately identify in its annual grants to British universities the sums of money made available for research.

The objective is to discourage universities from spending research funds for other purposes, but it runs directly counter to the traditional mystique of the University Grants Committee, which disburses the funds and which has always resisted suggestions that its decisions derive from an explicit formula.

The committee, which also has pointed comments on the ways in which British research councils conduct their affairs, was set up last year by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils to look into the relationship between research councils and universities.

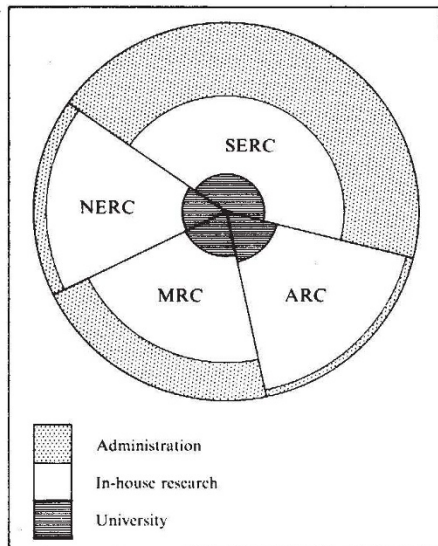
The chairman, Mr J.R.S. Morris (also chairman of Brown and Root (UK) Ltd) is a newcomer to these circles but has a reputation for being able to make up his mind. It may be significant that the signatories of the report include Sir David Phillips, the new chairman of the advisory board, and Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, the new chairman of the University Grants Committee. Neither appears to have dissented from the recommendations.

That may be because the committee has ducked the most contentious issue on its agenda — that of how research councils should divide their resources between in-house research and support for research in universities. The report does, however, quote complaints from several universities that research councils are over-protective of their in-house work.

The proposal that the research element in public support for individual universities should be separately known is intended to ensure that universities do not skimp on research support when budgets are tight. Evidence that this temptation is real is provided by some of the representations to the committee by universities, and is the reason why some research councils have recently been compelled to augment research grants to academics by payments to meet the cost of equipment that would normally have been provided by universities.

But the proposal flatly contradicts one of the conclusions of a working party on the British dual-support system under Sir

Alec Merrison. It is likely to cause most offence among universities, especially those guilty of skimping on research, on the grounds that their autonomy would thus be further undermined. The Morris committee also recommends that the research component of university recurrent grants should be allocated to different departments by a research committee — and then points out that universities have been slow to set up machinery along these lines although urged to do so a year ago.



The support given by research councils for in-house and university research. ARC, Agricultural Research Council; MRC, Medical Research Council; NERC, Natural Environment Research Council; SERC, Science and Engineering Research Council. Most in-house spending at SERC is at service laboratories and on international subscriptions. Data from the Morris report.

Although the committee studiously avoids taking sides, its tone of voice is consistently sympathetic to the universities. Thus it asks that when research council institutes are engaged on research that might also be carried on in universities, the research council concerned should "undertake a review" of its arrangements.

The general theme of the report is that "we are firmly convinced that there should be a much closer integration of the research institutes' and the universities' research activities". Sometimes, it seems, "suspicion and jealousy" impede relationships and, thinking positively, the committee asks the research councils to take the lead in improving relationships with the academic research community.

Other housekeeping points for the councils include the following:

- Research councils should review the work of their establishments at least once in

four years and make the reports of these investigations more widely available.

- In the interests of flexibility, councils should employ more staff on short-term contracts.

- Some research institutes should be made to compete for a part of their funds "on a similar basis to the universities".

- Institutes set up to provide a service to the universities should always (not just sometimes) have users' committees.

- The work of the same establishments should be reviewed at regular intervals, among other things to avoid the temptation that their own staffs will consume the services they are intended to provide for others.

There is some full-throated applause for those councils (chiefly the Medical, Agricultural and Natural Environment Research Councils) that support research units within universities, chiefly on the grounds that this is an effective way of stimulating a close interaction. And the universities do not get off scot-free — the committee complains of the inflexibility of their departmental structure and of their poor record in multidisciplinary research.

A note of something akin to idealism sounds through it all — the Morris committee urges that the research councils and their establishments should encourage a sense of community among people working in the same field at different institutions. And there is loud approval for the recent signs that polytechnics, the forgotten half of British higher education, may soon be treated as if they were capable of carrying out research. □

Curb on US political checks proposed

Washington

IN the wake of a series of revelations concerning the Reagan Administration's practice of screening candidates for federal scientific advisory committees for their political leanings, Senator Dale Bumpers (Democrat, Arkansas) has proposed legislation explicitly banning such practices. His bill (S. 1641) would prevent government officials from investigating the political affiliation of candidates for such committees or using such information in selecting committee members.

Reagan Administration officials have routinely submitted names of candidates for "political checks" by the Republican National Committee, where officials then report back whether they have voted in recent elections.

Bumpers's bill allows anyone to sue any federal agency to enforce the act and requires a committee to be discharged and reappointed from scratch if any of its members have been appointed — or any candidates denied appointment — in violation of the act. Stephen Budiansky

*The support given by research councils for in-house and university research, ABRC, available free from Publications Despatch Centre, Dept of Education & Science, Honey Pot Lane, Stanmore, Middlesex HA7 1AZ, UK.