

Soviet libraries

How Novosibirsk keeps up

SOVIET engineers and applied scientists consider the updating of their professional knowledge to be of "vital importance", according to a survey reported in *Pravda* two weeks ago. This, of itself, is fairly surprising. For the past ten years, the Soviet media, including the slogans of the May Day and Revolution Day parades, have urged them to keep abreast of the latest developments in their profession, while the universities, the higher education institutes, the radio "universities of the masses" and the All-Union "Znanie" (knowledge) Society maintain a vast network of updating and upgrading courses. Unexpectedly, however, the *Pravda* report indicated that few of those interviewed attend formal refresher courses or use specialized science libraries. This result is particularly surprising, because the survey was conducted in Novosibirsk, the home of the Siberian branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and of several major research universities, science libraries and information centres.

Participation in refresher courses brings a number of fringe benefits for Soviet scientists. There is generous provision for study and examination leave and, officially, a person enrolled on such a course cannot be compelled to work overtime. Yet out of 626 people interviewed, only 1.3 per cent are enrolled in university courses (leading to a degree) and 26.4 per cent in job-related "higher qualification courses". No fewer than 70.4 per cent said that they were studying on their own.

Pravda rightly points out that private study can be effective only if it has a proper information base. More than half of those interviewed claimed that they had too little time to use the Novosibirsk libraries as much as they wished. Often, they said, the time spent travelling to and from a library was several times that spent consulting the works they had gone to read. More than 70 per cent complained of the difficulty of finding what they wanted to read, even with the help of catalogues designed to facilitate searching. More than 80 per cent said they preferred to find the information they require directly at their work-place; about 30 per cent liked to study at home by way of television, radio, books or journals and only 14 per cent favoured going to libraries. When asked "from what source do you most often obtain information that is valuable to you?", the most popular answers were journals and television, with books in only seventh place.

The *Pravda* commentator, A. Fabrichnyi (a senior lecturer at the Novosibirsk Higher Party School), suggests that the figures indicate a need to rethink and improve the "scientific and technical propaganda system". The media, in general, should be involved more closely with the

dissemination of new scientific knowledge, particularly the high-circulation periodicals of individual industries, which, paradoxically, contain far less material of direct use to the industrial scientists than do the major all-union dailies and weeklies.

What the commentator fails to note is that the basis of the survey seems ill-defined, with improvement of qualifications covering both the sustained study required to obtain a higher degree and the reading of occasional information sheets from the Scientific and Technical Information Centre. The disproportion between travelling to a library and time spent in it, the emphasis on television and journals and the preference for working alone suggest that improving one's qualifications may often mean nothing more than browsing through professional journals or watching a science programme on television.

Vera Rich

Public understanding

Royal Society urges activity

THE Royal Society will soon be awarding an annual prize to the British scientist or organization doing most to further public understanding of science if it follows all the recommendations of the committee on the subject under Dr W.F. Bodmer (Imperial Cancer Research Fund) published this week*. The essential argument of the report is that public understanding is a public good which scientists have a "professional responsibility to promote".

The most subversive of the proposals in the report, which is said to have been accepted by the council of the Royal Society, are however those concerning the British educational system. Thus the Bodmer committee asks that no school student should be allowed to concentrate exclusively on science or non-science studies "even after the age of 16", and that students at universities should be helped to a broader education either by courses of general study or in some other way.

In an attack on present practices in British secondary schools, the Bodmer report says that the education of post-16 students is "appallingly narrow" and that the degree of specialization now common, entailing as it does a "wasteful repetition" at school of what is later studied at university, is "totally unnecessary". The document goes on to say that universities and other institutions of higher education help to restrict the broadening of education by their "unnecessary and unreasonable" demands for specialization and says that claims that reform would undermine the quality of British higher education are belied by the success of school systems elsewhere.

Research data

University sues laggard students

Washington

WASHINGTON State University has filed a \$150,000 lawsuit against two graduate students who, it alleges, have refused to turn over data on trace gases in the atmosphere that were gathered during an Antarctic research project. An affidavit signed by the principal investigator of the project says one of the students has threatened to destroy the data if the university tries to recover them.

The issue is important because it raises questions about the contractual obligations of people other than principal investigators to the grant-making agencies supporting university research. Questions about the responsibility of students to their supervisors, and of universities for their students, also arise.

The data were gathered as part of a four-year project supported by the

The committee also wants a broader education, including experience of work outside the educational system, for science teachers, and says that in-service training should be an integral part of their conditions of service, not "an optional extra for enthusiasts".

Broadly speaking, the Bodmer committee is appreciative of the treatment accorded to science in the British press but especially by the broadcasting media. It gives a sympathetic account of the problems encountered by science journalists in the internal competition for newspaper space, but also says that the low opinion among editors of the importance of science in newspapers is belittling and "unwarranted". The committee complains that, with one exception, it failed to evoke a response from the newspaper editors whom it asked for help.

On the scientific community's responsibility, the committee urges that scientists are not excused by the emergence of a substantial number of professional writers on the subject (with whom the committee also notes a persisting professional mistrust). Apart from the proposal that the Royal Society should award an annual prize, the committee suggests that PhD candidates might be asked to produce a summary of their work for a lay audience, that the Royal Society should take the initiative in organizing press briefings for science journalists and that it should set up a standing committee to monitor progress in the field. □

*The Public Understanding of Science (ISBN 0 05403 25756), from the Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AG.