Thatcher's science policy takes a step towards 'privatization'

London

HAVING already disposed of several nationalized industries by selling them to the general public, the British government has now embarked on an unusual scheme for gathering advice on its conduct of science policy from a newly created private organization. Last week, the Advisory Council for Applied Research and Development (ACARD), announced the formation of an independent "Centre for Exploitable Areas of Science and Technology", which will give advice on the direction of British technology to the government and, occasionally, to the general public. The new centre, described as an independent organization, will be supported by £5 million during its first five years. Of the total sum, the government has contributed £1 million, the remainder having been raised by subscription from 15 private industrial companies. For the time being, government officials will not say which they are.

Sir Francis Tombs, ACARD's chairman who is also the chairman of the newly privatized aeroengine company Rolls-Royce, is understood to have been attracted by the idea of an independent source of research and development strategy since the publication last year of ACARD's report *Exploitable Areas of Science*, in which the founding of an independent centre was a central recommendation. The scheme has also been supported recently by the Cabinet Office.

How the centre will function is nevertheless far from clear even at this stage. A statement of congratulation from the prime minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, says that it will monitor both research and development and changes in world markets, judge what holds promise of commercial exploitation, "find better ways of linking with scientists, manufacturers and commerce" and encourage industry and investors to keep scientists and researchers in touch with market needs.

Some officials believe that the essence of the centre's role will be to identify the directions in which the pattern of British civil research and development can most profitably be guided, using the experience of industrial and commercial people to distinguish between proposals for catching up with developments already successful elsewhere and those that could be distinctively successful. How such opinions would be communicated to the world at large remains unclear, as does the composition of the centre and its governing council, though it has been announced that Sir Robin Nicholson, the science adviser in the Cabinet Office until his move to the glass-maker Pilkington more

than a year ago, is the chairman of the steering committee.

An official says that the governing council will consist of representatives of those who have contributed to the initial costs. Asked whether academic researchers would be represented, he said that this would probably take the form of representation from the Advisory Board for the Research Councils.

Ironically, the formation of the new centre comes on the heels of the decision

last month that the Technical Change Centre, another independent centre, should be closed down due to lack of continuing support from the public research councils. The Technical Change Centre was funded eight years ago by the Leverhulme Foundation, the Science and Engineering Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Earlier this year, ESRC decided that its block grant to the centre would have to be replaced by project grants in which the centre would compete with other applicants. A government official says that the closing of one centre and the opening of the other was a "coincidence".

John Maddox

British university research has been sold "too cheap"

London

BRITISH universities have been underpricing their research effort for decades and must establish a more efficient method of estimating the true cost and charging their clients accordingly. These are the conclusions of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals which has just published two discussion papers to help create a more professional framework for the financial management of British universities.

Poor management and bad costing within the universities, claims the committee, has meant that research carried out for industrial clients and government

agencies is being subsidized from the basic grant, which is intended for pure research. The committee further calls on government to set an example by paying the "full economic cost" of the work being done. A working group of the committee which studied the problem was chaired by Professor Harry Hanham, vice-chancellor of the University of Lancaster. He says that "universities must continue to expand their income from private sources for research, short course and other projects, but it is essential that in going after this business they do not inadvertently subsidize it from their mainstream basic research and teaching budgets. If they do, the pursuit of cash today could mean intellectual and financial bankruptcy tomorrow."

The committee's views are meant to reflect the more austere climate that now exists in British universities and to endorse the encouragement given by government to increase industrial sponsorship. The vice-chancellors conclude that failure to maintain and increase the level of research funding from resources other than the University Grants Committee (UGC) and the research councils is likely to lead to a fall in the overall level of research activity and the international standing of UK universities as research institutions. The new framework for effectively costing and controlling the finances of research should include a formula for adequately rewarding the universities through royalties when their work is commercially exploited.

The universities are invited to submit their views on the proposals by 1 November. The government plans to replace the UGC with a smaller body with more industrial representation, called the Universities Funding Council (UFC), which will distribute funds to the universities "under new contract arrangements". Efficient cost control will be crucial in securing such contracts.

Bill Johnstone

Park going west

London

BRITAIN'S biggest science research park has been launched in the Bristol area, and its promoters say they hope its US-style design will "help stem the brain drain" of talented scientists. The £250 million project, covering 500 acres at Emersons Green, Kingswood, is billed as "a one-stop shop for research and development, providing management, venture capital and marketing support". It will be developed in association with the universities of Bristol and Bath, and Bristol Polytechnic.

"Scientists will have the opportunity to set up their own businesses, working directly with commerce and getting the rewards they deserve," says promoter Mike Saunders. The first scientists should be working on the site within two years, he says, in an environment planned to include leisure and shopping facilities, residential units, and a hotel and conference centre.

Promoters are hoping to attract investment from high technology firms in the United States and Japan, and Mr Saunders says several international companies have expressed interest.

Kathy Johnston