UK science budget to grow despite economic woes and cap on salaries

London. The British government's announcement last week that it plans to increase the science budget by just under 4 per cent next year dispelled rumours circulating among the heads of the country's research councils that the economic crisis would deal a serious blow to science. Government ministers have labelled the increase, slightly higher than the anticipated rate of inflation, as a "modest rise" in spending on research.

"The settlement is a good deal better than we had been led to believe", says Sir Mark Richmond, chairman of the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC). Similarly Dai Rees, secretary of the Medical Research Council, put out a statement saying that the council is "pleased with today's news".

There was widespread disappointment, however, that the government failed to keep to last year's promise to secure a real growth in the science budget and that government scientists — including those working in universities — will receive increases of no more than 1.5 per cent, a ceiling being imposed on all public sector workers over the next 12 months.

"Scientists' salaries — hardly over-generous at the moment — will fall even further in comparison with earnings in industry and abroad", says Rees. "If we are to work to improve the health of the nation, we cannot afford to put ourselves at a disadvantage which, however short-term in intention, will be long-term in effect."

In its announcement, the government said that the science budget, which includes the work of the five research councils, will be £1.164 billion (US\$1.85 billion) for the fiscal year starting next April. After deducting £125 million being transferred from the universities' budget under the dual support system, this represents an increase of 3.69 per cent over this year's figure of £1.050 billion (minus £48 million in transfers) and a real increase of 1 per cent. But it is still £17 million less than the government last year provisionally agreed to spend next year.

Provisional figures for subsequent years have also been reduced, to £1.231 billion in 1994–95 (a reduction of £40 million) and £1.265 billion the following year. When inflation is taken into account, the result is a flat research budget for the next three years.

Government officials have been keen to put a positive slant on the figures. William Waldegrave, minister of science, said at a press conference that he was "reasonably pleased" with the outcome of what he described as "the toughest expenditure rounds that I have been involved in over the past decade. . . . In a very difficult year, it shows

that spending on science remains one of the government's highest priorities."

Detailed figures are not yet available for research spending by other government departments. Waldegrave said, however, that "from a preliminary look, it appears as if their R&D spending will on average be

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about comparable with ours — in other words, they will be about level in real terms."

The Advisory Board for the Research Councils, which must recommend to Waldegrave how this money should be divided, faces some difficult decisions. The Science and Engineering Research Council, for example, faces a major increase in the costs of its international subscriptions, in particular to the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) and the European Space Agency (ESA), because of the recent devaluation of the pound.

"The situation is a good deal worse than it was a year ago", says Richmond, pointing out that the council must spend about £10 million more next year on international subscriptions. During the previous currency crisis a few years ago, the government eventually agreed to cover the shortfall; this time SERC has been told to find the

money out of its own budget.

A spokesman for the Economic and Social Research Council said that next year's funding constraints mean that "all flexibility has now virtually disappeared. We are facing real cuts in our budget, which in particular means the loss of planned research programmes on issues like risk, human behaviour and training for employment."

The decision to limit pay increases provides short-term relief for the science budget. Salaries account for about 40 per cent of this budget, and the move will save about £3 million.

Waldegrave believes that most scientists would prefer to have the government cap their salaries than reduce the amount of research it funds. But others have warned that any advantage could be short-lived. A spokesman for the Association of University Teachers described the settlement as "particularly bad news" in the light of the career uncertainties facing British scientists.

"Much of the impact [of the pay restrictions] will depend on how long the situation lasts", says Richmond. "If people think that it is going to last for two or three years, then they are going to start looking for jobs outside research."

Not surprisingly, the government's decision to allocate less money to science next year than it had previously promised has produced sharp criticism from the pressure group Save British Science. "Everyone welcomed the first sign of a real increase which the government promised last year. Now that has been wiped out," says John Mulvey, professor of physics at the University of Oxford and secretary of the SBS group. "We cannot express any pleasure at that, even though we understand that hard decisions have to be taken during a recession."

SBS is pinning its hopes on the contents of a white paper (policy document) on the organization of British science, due out early next year. "We hope that, at the very least, the White Paper will contain some targets to be aimed at over the next four or five years that will see the science base properly funded and help secure the desperately needed investment", says Mulvey.

Waldegrave refused to speculate on its contents, but he suggested that the creation of a new Office of Science and Technology (OST), separating responsibility for science from the Department of Education and Science, shows the government's commitment to research. "I believe that if the OST had not existed, the budget would have been worse", he said.

David Dickson