

NEWS AND VIEWS

Changes at Teddington

THE National Physical Laboratory seems to have survived the constitutional re-shuffle which has occurred since the advent of the Ministry of Technology. The annual report for 1966 (HMSO, £1.5) gives details of exactly what has happened, which amounts in the first place to the creation of a number of committees. There are now two major committees concerned with the policy of the NPL, a steering committee under the chairmanship of Professor B. H. Flowers, and a visiting board of about 50, chaired by the President of the Royal Society. The steering committee, which in addition to Professor Flowers consists of nine members including Dr H. M. Finnieston, Dr. J. V. Dunworth and several industrialists, is responsible for submitting to the Minister of Technology the annual research programme, together with the budget and staff needs. The function of the large visiting board is more obscure, but almost everybody is on it, including the entire steering committee, and it is to meet annually to discuss the work of the laboratory and make recommendations to the President and Council of the Royal Society.

The Royal Society, in fact, is deeply involved with the new structure, although the scheme of management makes it clear that the Minister of Technology's decision is final. The Royal Society seems likely to fill a useful but unexciting role as supplier of committee fodder, with no executive authority.

As for the laboratory itself, it has been divided into three groups: the Measurement Group (standards, instrumentation, applied physics, acoustics, radiology and light), the Materials Group (chemical standards, inorganic materials, metallurgy and molecular science) and another group which has defied labelling and is referred to in the report as the Third Group. This includes aerodynamics, autonomies, mathematics and the ship division. As the report notes, all this reorganization has taken time, but is now coming into operation. There is a hint that in future the work of the laboratory will not be so widely spread—"the new programme for 1967-68 already represents a useful degree of consolidation in that effort is now being concentrated on a limited number of objectives". Assailed with advice from all sides, it may be difficult to maintain this position.

The full cost to the Exchequer of the NPL in 1965-66 is estimated as £5.5 million, of which £3.6 million was direct expenditure. The cost per unit of staff is rising steadily, but the cost of administration has declined as a percentage of the total cost—in 1965-66 it was 4.1 per cent, against 4.4 per cent the year before.

No Change for Chemistry

THE Royal Society is carrying out a survey of the quality of postgraduate education in the United Kingdom. As well as an inquiry about what the postgraduate students think, questionnaires are being sent to firms employing PhDs, asking what the value of a

doctorate really is. Five committees have been set up: in chemistry, under Professor R. A. Raphael of Glasgow University; in physics, under Professor C. C. Butler of Imperial College; in biology, under Professor Harley of Sheffield University; and in mathematics and engineering, both under Professor M. J. Lightill of Imperial College. There is also to be an investigation of the earth sciences, but this has run into some difficulties, and a chairman has yet to be appointed.

The studies are being organized as the individual chairmen see fit. Professor Lightill, for instance, has written to 1,900 postgraduates from five different academic years, and to 90 individual firms and institutions. The information from universities has already been collected, and the report on engineering should be published by December. Professor Raphael, on the other hand, restricted his inquiry to 106 professors of chemistry in Britain and to six well known chemistry centres in the United States (Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, UCLA, Wisconsin). The chemistry report, now published, is therefore very much less valuable than it might be. It has no replies from students or from industry. This is all the more surprising because the inquiry was prompted by industrial criticism of the PhDs produced by British universities.

The picture that emerges is described by Professor Raphael as one of "concerned non-complacency", though an industrial observer might find something much ruder to say about it. Not surprisingly, a majority of the universities are in favour of retaining their present arrangements, but those which do contemplate change were not asked what the changes would be. Three-quarters of those asked were against the introduction of classes (1st, 2nd, 3rd) into PhD degrees, but more than 70 per cent revealed that their postgraduates do compulsory course work. The suggestions made were mostly rather unambitious—more collaboration with industry, the provision of more technical help for research students, a toughening up of the attitude of outside examiners, and making laboratory and library facilities available at weekends. The survey means that more is now known about the way in which British chemistry departments operate, but what people feel about their products is still a mystery.

Technology of Teaching

THE National Council for Education Technology now seems to be a going concern. According to the Department of Education and Science, the council—the composition of which is still incomplete—held its first meeting on May 31. The department also announced that the first director of the council will be Mr R. A. Becher, an assistant director of the Nuffield Foundation who is being seconded to the council from September 1 this year. Mr Becher has for some years been closely concerned with the initiation of the foundation's educational work.

Precisely how the national council will operate is not yet clear. Historically it descends from the report of the committee of the University Grants Committee under Dr Brynmor Jones, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hull, on the uses of audio-visual methods and other ancillary devices in higher education. One of the recommendations of the committee was that