IN BRIEF

Computing costs

For the second time in three weeks the UK Computer Board for Research Councils and Universities has drawn attention to the problem it is facing with rising costs. In its Sixth Annual Report published just before Christmas (Cmnd. 6696, HMSO, 45p), the Board expressed concern at the rapid increase in recurrent expenditure at university computing centres. These had resulted mainly from staff salary rises and increased maintenance costs. The Board added that it was "unlikely" that all recurrent commitments could be met, and that criteria were being sought for the equitable allocation of the funds available. This is expected to be a tortuous process.

Last week the Board published a report outlining the policy framework the Board considers necessary for the development of university computing facilities over the next ten years (*Computers in Higher Education and Research; The Next Decade*, HMSO, 60p). Concern about costs was again emphasised but the cause became clearer when a figure was put on the rise. From the 1975–76 level of £6.2 million, the trend is for recurrent costs to rise—"at a rate of 32%". And the figure is an annual one, though the report does not make this clear.

The Board estimates that university computing facilities proposed for the next decade could be obtained at a capital cost of £9.4 million a year. It adds that "it is not entirely clear" that the government's procurement policy favouring ICL has been beneficial "either to the universities or to ICL".

Uranium views

If opposition in Australia to the development of nuclear fuel resources is successful, scientists who want to become part of the development of uranium mining and processing and of nuclear power will have to leave the country, according to Sir Charles Court, the premier of Western Australia. Responding last week to scientists who have urged the national government to ban uranium mining and exports, he described their attitude as "negative and defeatist".

Aspects of the mining and processing of uranium were the subject of a symposium held in London this week. One presentation, from Michael Davis of the European Commission of the EEC, argued that European uranium needs in relation to the world market were of paramount importance to the market's future. "Close collaboration" between utilities and mining companies was highly desirable, and a contribution from the public authorities was necessary to achieve an orderly market.

Peer review

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It has been said that the warp that holds the complex fabric of science together is peer review, and the woof is the noise made by scientists who complain about it. Be that as it may, it is obvious that without peer review, scientific literature would become a Tower of Babel. One has only to look across the street to see what goes on in the newspapers for reassurance as to this point. Science is essentially hierarchical; its progress and its integrity depend on the existence of an 'establishment', and on the rejection of uncontrolled or unrepeatable experimental results. There are objectors who say that such rigidity prevents valuable innovations from coming to light. The answer to this may be formulated as a Darwinian analogy: such innovations are like the exceedingly rare class of mutations that are beneficial to a species, and hence overcome all odds against their survival and spread.

I am indebted to a lecture by Professor Emilio Segre for an anecdote of Rutherford's rejection, on behalf of *Philosophical Magazine*, of a manuscript by the youthful Bohr, describing a new theory of atomic structure. But the young genius was not to be denied. He journeyed from Denmark to England to confront Rutherford, the giant of physics, and won his point: the famous article was published. The answer to the line in Gray's *Elegy*, mourning the possible loss of "some mute inglorious Milton", may be that Miltons are never mute. Nevertheless, I do not recommend making a trip to the offices of *Nature* to argue with the Editor except under most extreme circumstances.

The word "peer" implies acceptance by a group of equals. The process of acceptance in the group, and acknowledgement of its hegemony by the individual who has been accepted, is complex and fascinating. There are special cases; for example, one of the principles of scientific organisation is that a veterinarian should report only to another veterinarian. I presume that at the head of such a pyramid must be one, perhaps a Dr Cabot, D.V.M., who reports only to the Great Veterinarian. Nobel Laureates are another special case; some of them acquire omniscience after their return from Stockholm, and henceforth they blossom in new fields. This subject is admittedly a delicate one, but I am intrigued by an advertisement in a financial newspaper, appealing for tax-deductible contributions. "Each contributor will be sent an article on sugar—its effect on the body; an article on Vitamin C—how much to take and how it may benefit your life; and a just-published article showing the dramatic effects of Vitamin C on cancer." Idly, I wondered who reviewed these articles that are so temptingly offered in exchange for cash.

Publishing a book is a way of avoiding peer review. Confronted with criticism, the authors of such books are apt to remind their detractors that Galileo was persecuted by the Inquisition, and that sceptics told the Wright brothers that their aeroplane wouldn't fly. In one recent case, the author said that high-quality DNA and RNA can be supplied from outside the body to "nourish our cells and return them to a healthy state." Apparently he had not heard about nucleases, purine catabolism or gout. The publishers of the book, more interested in sales than veracity, allegedly have set aside $20,000 to promote it further. Peer review is evidently of secondary interest when such financial manoeuvres are involved.

And so, to those who chafe under the pettifogging and nitpicking annoyances of the comments of reviewers who "don't seem to understand how important this piece of research is", let us counsel patience, forbearance and cunning. Hang in there, and remember that, after all, if you can't convince the reviewer, you *may* not be able to persuade other readers. Also, you, too, may perhaps be a reviewer some day.