UK university fund 'seeking out the best'

WELLCOME TRUST

[LONDON] High-quality schemes that are both ambitious and imaginative are being sought for a new £600-million fund for research infrastructure being jointly funded by the British government and the Wellcome Trust.

This is the message that both the government and the trust say they want to convey to Britain's scientific community as they open the first call for applications today.

Mike Dexter, director of the Wellcome Trust, argues that a shortage of funds has forced universities to adopt a conservative approach to applying for support. "We want to change this culture of undercutting, where universities write out applications on the basis that the lowest-value bid will get funded."

Richard Lane, programme director of the fund at the Wellcome Trust, adds: "We want the best science, but not just safe science. In the long-run, cheap does not necessarily mean value for money."

Dexter says the fund is looking for imaginative, perhaps cross-disciplinary, ideas that may need time to develop and may not lead to an immediate flow of research publications.

The government and the trust will each contribute £300 million to the fund, which was announced in the July budget (see *Nature* **394**, 209; 1998) and will last until 2001. It is designed primarily to purchase equipment and for the construction and refurbishment of laboratories. Bids below £750,000 are unlikely to be considered.

Dexter: in quest of imaginative ideas.

Government officials and trust representatives will embark on a 'road-show' of six universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland on 9 October, introducing the fund and giving potential applicants a feel for types of projects likely to be funded.

Sir John Cadogan, director general of the research councils, says universities would be wrong to see the fund merely as a way of fixing old equipment, as applications had to be accompanied by plans for "high-level science".

Cadogan will chair the fund's joint executive committee, the body that will ultimately decide which projects to support. In January he will hand over to his successor, John Taylor, director of Hewlett Packard's European research laboratories in Bristol. Dexter will be the committee's deputy chair.

The committee is made up of government officials, the heads of the research councils, representatives of the Wellcome Trust, and the heads of the four UK higher-education funding councils, who are non-voting members.

Both Cadogan and Dexter believe that more than half of the fund is likely to be allocated to applications with a biological science component, largely because of the trust's legal status as a charity devoted to biomedical research. But they say that there are no quotas for any particular type of research, nor will the fund be divided according to regions.

Lane and Dexter emphasize that the fund will not "in any way" reflect the trust's own research priorities, which are taken care of under separate programmes. It remains unclear at present the extent to which proposals selected for funding will be associated with topics identified as potential priorities in the government's Technology Foresight exercise.

An international scientific advisory board will assess all applications with an emphasis on the biomedical and biological sciences, including environmental science. The board will be chaired by Richard Flavell, professor of immunobiology at the Yale University School of Medicine. Its members have yet to be confirmed, but two-thirds are expected to come from outside the United Kingdom.

Existing peer review panels from four research councils — Engineering and Physical Sciences, Particle Physics and Astronomy, Natural Environment, and Economic and Social Research — will assess all other research applications. The international scientific advisory board and the joint executive committee will hold five application rounds between now and 2001.

Ehsan Masood

French government tightens its grip on research priorities

[PARIS] France has decided to create a centralized FF500 million ($89 million) annual fund for basic research within the Ministry of Research. Although some of the money for the so-called National Science Funds (FNS) has been taken from existing ministry budget lines, much of it is new.

The fund forms part of the French civil budget for research and development for 1999, the distribution of which indicates a shift towards greater ministerial control and a preference for the universities over the public research agencies, such as the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).

The overall budget is expected to increase slightly, by 1.6 per cent, to FF53.9 billion. The new fund will be used mainly to finance multidisciplinary research projects, emerging areas of research, and in particular programmes that span several research organizations. The latter indicates a shift to carrying out strategic research, such as genomics, at a supra-agency level.

Strategic research directions will be decided upon by a new 28-member advisory committee, the National Science Council, chaired by Claude Allègre, the minister for national education, research and technology. The committee, a third of whose members will be from overseas, will be attached to the prime minister's office.

It is not yet clear how grants will be selected. But according to Vincent Courtillot, Allègre's principal adviser, the process will rely on an open call for proposals and external peer review administered by a series of new ministerial committees, such as that recently created to coordinate life sciences (see *Nature* 395, 315; 1998).

Management of cross-agency projects would be delegated to the research organization with most expertise in the field concerned. This may ease trade union fears that grant distribution within programmes may be centralized within a few ministerial committees rather than being carried out by the research organizations themselves.

Courtillot says the fund represents a 'top-down' effort by the ministry to fix the broad directions of strategic research areas, while maintaining an investigator-driven 'bottom up' approach to distributing grants within these areas.

The Funds for Technology Research, which had accumulated a debt of FF1 billion, is back in the black and will receive FF660 million in the new budget. Priorities include nanotechnology, drug development and new materials. A further FF200 million seed fund has been created to encourage start-up technology companies.

A breakdown of the budget allocations for individual research organizations has not been finalized, but according to Courtillot these will increase by 2.2 per cent overall, with funding for laboratory equipment and supplies being increased by 8 per cent, by making economies in administration and shifting programme research to the national level.

CNRS declines to comment on what these figures will mean on the ground. But Audier's analysis of the figures suggests that the CNRS budget is at best "very mediocre".

The universities' research budget will rise by 2.9 per cent, with fundamental research increasing by 7.3 per cent, according to the ministry. The latter is a "political message" that the university is the natural home for research, says Courtillot. Similarly, while 100 research posts and 50 technician posts will be created within the research organizations, the universities will obtain 1,500 assistant lecturer posts.

Declan Butler