


 The logo for the journal Nature, featuring the word "nature" in a lowercase, serif font inside a dark rectangular box.

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Public interest representation on research councils?

Who runs Britain's science? A simple question capable of an exceedingly complex answer, so widely is science dispersed across the scene. But for university scientists and many others in specialist laboratories there is a relatively simple answer: the research councils, which fund individual research projects, provide studentships and fellowships and operate a large number of major laboratories, many with an international reputation.

And who sits on the research councils and on the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, which coordinates their efforts and provides advice to the Secretary of State for Education and Science on how to spend £300 million annually? Distinguished scientists and medical men, a handful of industrial scientists and one or two farmers (on the Agricultural Research Council). Council members are appointed by the Secretary of State.

Now to the best of our knowledge members of the research councils fulfil their duties diligently, giving up time that they can often ill afford to attend meetings, understand complex issues and help to steer policy. We do not question the effort that they put in. What should be questioned is whether the composition of the councils is right for the 1980s, and whether there should not be a greater representation of what, for want of better words, may be called the public interest.

Before we are accused of mischievously allowing amateurs and meddlers to interfere with such delicate issues as who gets grants, it should be made clear that each research council has a complex structure of committees which handles such matters; council only concerns itself with broader issues. But these could profit by being understood and debated by people with an interest in science but who have not necessarily followed the research path.

There is no shortage of constituencies which could make valuable contributions. They could include trade-unionists, teachers, those in overseas development, politicians, science writers, lawyers, businessmen, bankers and doubtless many others. Since much of science is international, there should be no compelling reason why a foreigner (particularly from the EEC) could not be incorporated for some purposes — one or two other countries already do use foreign help in deciding science policy.

Of course scientists themselves would have to be protected against being swamped by non-scientists, but the model of the Genetic Manipulation Advisory Group, which satisfactorily incorporates several 'public interest' members, would bear study. One of the weaknesses of Britain is the lack of cross-communication between experts in different disciplines. Here is a chance for an experiment in trying to build up such cross links. □

Flying university in trouble

HIGHER education and scholarship in Poland recently acquired an unusual and innovative institution — the Society for Academic Courses, better known by its nickname of the 'Flying University'. This society arranges lectures, seminars and discussions to satisfy the needs particularly of young students given to questioning the information obtainable through conventional channels. Although a large fraction of the courses currently on offer concerns contemporary history and the social sciences, scientists are amongst the sponsors of the society, and a course is included on moral issues in biology. The society has received notable public support from physicist Janusz Groszkowski, former chairman of the Polish Academy of Sciences, who resigned his official posts in 1976 in protest against police interference in academic life.

The educational experiment has not gone entirely smoothly. The police had been regular visitors to houses where seminars are held, and several lecturers have been detained and fined on

various charges of disturbing the peace. Seminars have also been visited frequently by gangs of students intent on doing damage. This term only the inaugural session, by the sociologist Witold Bartoszewski and the physiologist Jan Kielanowski (a member of the official Polish Academy of Sciences) was given before the wreckers moved in. Two of those involved, Dr Bartoszewski, and Piotr Naimski, a biochemist, have each been fined 5000 zloty — the equivalent of an average month's academic salary — for their activities.

An international support committee has just been formed to provide encouragement for an independent intellectual life in Poland by the provision of material help, including books, and by the publication of research results. It is a cause that scientists who have a large amount of freedom to say and do what they wish may wish to contribute to.

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