

Making waves

Following hard on the heels of Amersham International, another "public" company — the Hydraulic Research Station at Wallingford, Oxfordshire — is to go "private" on 1 April, with Dr John Weare as managing director and chief executive.

All of the present staff will be seconded from the civil service to the company for one year, after which 80 per cent (about 200 people) are likely to be offered long-term contracts.

The transfer was not without its hitches. Staff at first resisted the move fearing that "privatization" would mean loss of government backing and lead to a lessening of the station's world-wide reputation. In fact, no drastic cutbacks are planned and the general feeling is that, freed from government constraints, the company will be better able to respond swiftly and competently to the needs of the civil engineering industry.

Sara Nash

Indian science education

Falling behind

New Delhi

In a major new exercise, Indian government circles concerned with science education are trying to find resources equivalent to \$55 million for the next three years to strengthen the science education base of the universities.

The government realizes that lack of support has allowed the university science system to run down and that this trend, if continued, may prove irreversible. The role of universities as advanced centres of teaching and research has been eroded by the rapid expansion in the number of institutions and students without a corresponding increase in the necessary facilities.

The Science Advisory Committee to the Cabinet (SACC) has long felt that the resources of the universities should be augmented as this would not only benefit universities but also assist the major scientific agencies of the country and industrial enterprises. The scientific manpower requirements of these agencies will be met by the universities. SACC recommended that central and state governments and industrial companies should combine to contribute about \$55 million to strengthen the science base of the universities. A detailed scheme is expected to be submitted to the cabinet for approval.

The Indian government also feels that the current pressure on the universities in terms of the enormous intake of science students should be reduced, and that equal opportunities should be provided for gainful employment for those who do not pursue careers in science after passing the school level examination. This system will

then provide the smaller number of science students with proper facilities. And as lack of instrumentation is a serious handicap for research in universities, the government is now considering stepping up instrument production.

It is widely believed also that the links of university research and national scientific agencies with public sector enterprises need to be strengthened. The present barriers between the two are impeding the country's scientific and technological progress.

Sunil Saraf

●Speaking at the invitation of the Science Policy Foundation in London last week, Mrs Indira Gandhi reasserted her commitment to the strengthening of Indian science and technology. Without internal strength, she said, the governments of developing nations cannot withstand the tendency of some nations to use the transfer of technology as an instrument of foreign aid. "We have not got out of one empire to get into another" was her reply when later questioned as to her country's relationship with the transnational corporations.

Self-reliance is also necessary, Mrs Gandhi said, because the problems of India are increasingly different from those of the developed nations. India needs to curb population growth, to find ways to grow crops in soil of low moisture and to prevent cholera and tuberculosis, not cancer and heart disease.

At the same time it is of immense benefit, even a necessity, for India to continue its own atomic energy, oceanographic and space programmes. "Our space effort is important for education and communication and deeper knowledge of the monsoon, which rules our economic calendar."

While emphasizing the unacknowledged, reverse economic aid donated by emigre Indians to "Western" scientific progress, Mrs Gandhi said that opportunities for intellectually challenging work must be increased to keep talented Indian scientists in the services of their own people.

Peter Newmark

National Research Council

Changes ahead

Washington

The US National Academy of Sciences is carrying out a major reshuffle of the complex organizational structure of its National Research Council (NRC). The purpose, according to the academy's new president, Dr Frank Press, is "to meet the opportunities ahead of us, to promote greater efficiency in our ability to respond to governmental requests and to meet changing economic circumstances".

NRC, the operational arm of the academy, provides advice to and carries out research on a contract basis for the federal government and other

organizations. Since 1973, it has operated through four assemblies — each based on a single discipline or set of disciplines — and four multidisciplinary commissions.

This arrangement was introduced to improve NRC's ability to tackle policy questions that frequently cross disciplinary boundaries. In practice, however, there has frequently been confusion over the relative responsibilities of the various assemblies and commissions — a situation which Dr Press hopes the new structure will avoid.

Three of the assemblies will therefore be merged with three of the commissions. The Assembly of Behavioral and Social Sciences will be merged with the Commission on Human Resources to become the Commission on Behavioral, Social Sciences and Education; the Assembly of Engineering will merge with the Commission on Sociotechnical Systems to become the Commission on Engineering and Social Systems; and the Assembly on Mathematical and Physical Sciences will join with the Commission on Natural Resources to become the Commission on Physical Sciences and Resources.

The future of the fourth assembly, the Assembly of Life Sciences, some of whose work currently overlaps with that of the Institute of Medicine, will be discussed at the next meeting of NRC's governing board which takes place on 3 April. Any changes to the constitution of the Institute of Medicine would have to be approved by its members.

The fourth commission, on international relations, will be transformed into a new Office of International Affairs, whose executive director will be Dr Victor Rabinowitch. The activities of the office will be overseen by a panel comprising the foreign secretary of the academy, Dr Walter Rosenblith, the foreign secretary of the National Academy of Engineering, the president of the Institute of Medicine, and Dr Rabinowitch; this panel will also undertake policy formulation for the whole of the academy complex.

The reorganization is part of a broad attempt by Dr Press to streamline the academy's activities and enable it to play a more active part in Washington science policy debates. One example of this new approach is a panel which is being set up under the Committee on Science and Public Policy (COSPP) to examine the implications of the closer links being drawn between US universities and the Department of Defense.

The panel will examine a range of issues raised by this enhanced relationship, from the application of export controls to unclassified research to broader impacts on academic freedom. Funding for the study has already been promised by the Defense Department itself, the National Science Foundation and the American Association for the Advancement of Science; NAS is seeking additional funds from outside sources.

David Dickson