UK universities

New blood posts make bad blood

THE British Government has now announced the final allocation of the 312 new appointments to be made in universities this year under its "New Blood" and Information Technology schemes (see *Nature* 301, 7; 1983). Details of the schemes, which will cost £100 million over three years, were first given last December by the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Sir Keith Joseph, and required that universities should apply to the University Grants Committee (UGC) by the end of February for an allocation from the national pool.

Several universities had to abandon their normal procedures to meet the deadline. In some cases, academic or faculty committees have not been fully consulted, as they would ordinarily expect to be. The allocations were processed in record time by UGC and the research councils. But UGC (which is getting used to criticism) has now been accused of bad management and illogicality by some universities.

Seventy of the new posts were originally set aside for lectureships and research posts in information technology. The remainder, for "new blood", comprises 32 arts and social science research posts and 210 for other sciences, among which the physical sciences and engineering predominate. More controversially, the lion's share of

chancellor of the University of Salford (two appointments) said UGC had chosen not to notice how different universities had responded to the budget reductions since 1981. Salford has been hailed as an example of how universities may survive through collaboration with local industrial companies. Professor Ashworth said the allocations were reminiscent of 1981, when some newer technologically-based universities were particularly hard hit.

UGC said last week that the committees making the allocations took into consideration the procedures used by different universities in ranking their applications. Although several of the universities were

clearly hoping that the new appointments would restore ground lost since 1981, UGC said that the effects of the 1981 cuts had not been taken into account except in the practical sense that departments must have adequate resources to support a new post.

A UGC member said that while some of the choices may have been less than perfect, UGC had learned a lot, and that this would be reflected when next year's allocations are made. It was also pointed out that, although many good applications had to be turned down, this was only the first year of a three-year scheme. But there had been no systematic bias, and some of the aggrieved institutions should be least consider the possibility that their applications "simply weren't good enough". They should, it was said, "try harder next time".

Tim Beardsley

Agricultural research

UK pressures towards autonomy

BRITISH agricultural research seems to be heading for a shake-up. That is the obvious reading of what the new chairman of the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), Lord Selborne, has been saying since his appointment as acting chairman last August. British farmers would be well advised to contribute towards the cost of agricultural research, Lord Selborne suggests, so as to insulate the enterprise from the vagaries of government policy.

Among the five publicly supported research councils in Britain, the agricultural council has been consistently the least favoured by successive governments. In the late 1960s, official discontent with the research programme of ARC provoked the Rothschild inquiry into the management of British civil science. Lord Rothschild recommended that nearly a third of ARC's budget should be transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture on a commission basis.

Now, as then, ARC is in a cleft stick; either its research makes such a direct contribution to the prosperity of agriculture that the beneficiaries — British farmers — should pay the cost, or its objectives are so distant as to be subsumed within a much more academically-oriented research council such as the Science and Engineering Research Council.

Consistently, ARC has asserted in successive annual reports that its interests lie with agricultural productivity. It may, however, have become the victim of its own propaganda, dependent on what farmers are prepared to pay rather than on taxpayers in general.

Small steps towards the devolution of ARC have been evident for several years. ARC institutes threatened because of financial stringency with closure have usually sought survival by means of farmers' subventions. As a consequence, part of the cost of the programme of research at the Long Ashton research sta-

tion in Wiltshire (south-west England) is paid for by means of a levy on the output of cider and perry manufacturers. Attempts to support research such as that under way at East Malling in Kent (south-east England) on the backs of apple and pear growers have, however, been less successful.

The most recent assault on ARC's survival was that of the Advisory Board on the Research Councils, made public (without precedent) towards the end of 1982, which recommended that the ARC budget should slowly shrink from the financial year beginning in April 1985. The ARC secretary, Dr Ralph Riley, "dissociated" himself from that proposal, and has now published a defence of ARC's position in the council's newsletter *ARC News* (Spring 1983).

Dr Riley says that if the intended cuts are implemented, 500 jobs in council establishments will have to go. *Pro rata*, a third of the posts concerned would be those of scientists. ARC is also, however, hoping to square its budget by encouraging more support for its research from farmers, to which end Riley promises central support for those in outlying establishments who wish to approach financially compliant (or simply rich) research partners.

In these circumstances, ARC may well find it convenient to cast its net more widely than in the past, encompassing not merely the science of how best to grow crops but that of how crops should best be consumed, as food.

To tell from how members of the council talk, partial independence along these lines is now the best solution; the question begged is simply that of whether governments such as the British can institutionalize the subsidy of research, as in the constitution of ARC, without implying in the process that if it succeeds, it should be paid for by somebody else — and that if it fails, it must have been a mistake that it was ever begun. □

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

'New Blood' appointments in Science (including Clinical Medicine and Mathematics)

Applications are invited for the following university lectureships tenable from 1 October 1983. It is intended that these appointments should be held in conjunction with a college fellowship. Further particulars of the university lectureships, and of relevant college posts, may be obtained from the head of the department indicated in each

New blood — old institution

the new appointments has gone to the old-established universities of London, Cambridge, Oxford and Edinburgh. The science posts are each worth £20,000 annually to the universities that receive them (out of which has to come a salary for a young researcher). Some of the smaller universities feel that more of the allocations should have gone to departments hit by cutbacks over the past two years.

There were 2,250 applications for the 342 posts, and UGC says that its selection criteria included the age structure in the departments concerned and the likely contributions to scholarship of the proposed post. Universities were also asked to attach a judgement of priority to their applications for science posts, but now several universities have expressed surprise about the subject allocations actually approved. Thus the University of Stirling, which has received three appointments, described the approvals as "having the appearance of randomness". Others were more forthright. Professor John Ashworth, vice-