

UK research councils

Where the cuts may come

A scrutiny of selected research council support services ordered last year by Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, has identified potential savings of £3.3 million a year which could be achieved through purchasing policy and management changes. A further one-off saving of £5.3 million could, according to the report, result from recommendations to the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) to dispose of some of their assets.

Individual reports on the four research councils scrutinized have not been made public and neither have the councils' responses, but the summary report of the

central team appointed by Sir Keith to carry out the scrutiny was published this week. As well as ARC and SERC, the National Environmental Research Council (NERC) and the Medical Research Council (MRC) were examined. These four councils had total budgets of £540 million in 1982-83 and employed 17,000 staff. Sir Keith has welcomed the scrutiny's recommendations, and has written to heads of research councils that "... the scope for greater efficiency and savings ... will be realised only if there is vigorous follow-up action at all levels". The councils have been asked to submit "action documents" on implementing the recommendations by the end of November, and progress will be monitored by the government's efficiency unit.

The most controversial recommendation is that SERC should sell off Herstmonceux Castle in Sussex, which forms part of the Royal Greenwich Observatory (see *Nature* 7 July, p3). Together with houses maintained for staff by SERC and ARC, the sale could, according to the report, raise £4.2 million immediately and save £1.05 million a year. To facilitate disposal of assets identified as "surplus to requirement", the review recommends that a proportion of the proceeds arising from sale should be retained by the research council concerned, rather than, as under present arrangements, be returned to the Treasury. The other savings, which mostly affect non-scientific staff, could be achieved by greater cooperation in pur-

chasing policy (ARC and MRC), improved costing of workshop services and rationalization of library provision (NERC and MRC) and of stores (everyone). Purchasing changes alone could save £1.2 million a year.

The report says there is a need for a general strengthening of procedures for staff inspection, management services studies and internal audits. It is also asserted that too much of the cost of support services has "been hidden or treated as an overhead", and that improvements in costing will ensure that those actually conducting research will bear the responsibility for ensuring value for money. It is recommended that costs be charged to users at programme or project level; one of the examining officers found that amongst users there was "a lack of awareness, a lack of interest, or indeed a feeling of helplessness, about the cost of support services".

Another major theme which emerges from the review is that there is scope for improvement in coordination between different units supported by the councils, both in purchasing policy and in services provided. The scrutiny team also wants heads of research councils to prepare proposals to assess "the value for money obtained from research projects" within their external project reviews.

Although the published report does not indicate how the councils responded to their respective reports, it is known that some of the recommendations relating to the SERC's assets have been contested within the council, on the grounds that they have scientific ramifications outside the scope of the Rayner unit's remit.

Tim Beardsley

Hopes for Insat-1B

New Delhi

SATELLITE-based domestic telecommunications, television and meteorological services in India should benefit from the successful launch of Insat-1B in India from Kennedy Space Center in Florida on 31 August. India's space programme had received a severe jolt last September when Insat-1A ran out of its onboard fuel. This prevented the national hook-up on television stations, needed for the coming Asian games, but the ground facilities created at a cost of £200 million were made use of by the hiring of two transponders on Intelsat and one transponder on a Soviet satellite. Insat-1B, stationed at 74 degrees east longitude in the geostationary orbit, will now be able to take over these functions.

One advantage of Insat-1B is that it will reduce the congestion in telecommunication services between the major cities of India. There will be 12 transponders, each with 600 working channels for telecommunications. In addition, two transponders will provide television and other meteorological services. Insat-1C, to be built with the help of Ford Aerospace and Communication Corporation, will replace the satellite abandoned last year.

"Insat-1C would represent a transitional stage between foreign-made Insat-1B and Indian-built Insat-2 test spacecraft which would be available by the end of the decade", says the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO).

Meanwhile, ISRO says that India's first experimental geostationary communications satellite Apple has achieved all its goals despite a jammed solar panel. Its life is expected to end this month.

Apple project director R.M. Vasagam says the experience gained in launching and using the satellite for technical experiments will help Indian scientists to build the second generation satellites. Sunil Saraf

UK biotechnology

Industry joins the universities

THE Institute for Biotechnological Studies, a non-profit-making company established earlier this year by three academic scientists, has launched a £1.4 million research programme in biotechnology funded jointly by industrial companies and the Department of Trade and Industry. The programme, which will last for five years, will employ model systems to investigate generic problems associated with the long-term use of immobilized cells in biosynthesis.

So far four companies have joined the scheme (Shell Research Ltd, Glaxo Group Research Ltd, May and Baker Ltd and Unilever PLC) and the programme may be extended to include up to three more. Industry's contribution will be matched by the government. The institute arose from collaborative teaching and research in biotechnology-related disciplines at the Polytechnic of Central London, University College London and the University of Kent. Last year a report by the institute's directors, Professors Alan Bull, Geoffrey Holt and Malcolm Lilly, prepared for the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, highlighted long-term use of biocatalysts as an area deserving urgent research, and the Department of Trade and Industry indicated its willingness to contribute provided that industry shared the cost. According to Professor Lilly, negotiations were made much easier for industrial companies by having the institute to unite the expertise of three academic departments.

Although the companies involved have different interests, the problems to be investigated are of sufficient general importance to justify the collaboration. Besides having access to research results at a fraction of normal cost, the participating companies will have access to specialist training courses provided by the institute. As the institute's primary aim is educational (it offers advice and will undertake contract research in a wide variety of areas in biotechnology), many of the research findings will be published, although the sponsors will retain a right of veto.

Tim Beardsley