British research councils

More trimming in prospect

CHAIRMEN of British research councils, in their annual reports, have to tread a difficult path between complacency and despair. Sir Hermann Bondi, chairman of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) is no exception. In his annual report for the financial year 1982-83, published last week, Sir Hermann paints an encouraging picture of NERC's future prospects against a background of depressing financial news.

Sir Hermann singles out for special mention the work of the British Institutions Reflection Profiling Syndicate, which has produced important results on the border between the Earth's mantle and crust. Another important growth area for the council is the use of satellite data. But, like other research councils, NERC is having to cut back on research in some areas in order to allow for expansion elsewhere. Some 80 posts will be lost during the current year, and next year the target will be a further 120 posts, although many staff will be redeployed.

NERC's biggest financial worry is that research commissioned by government departments has fallen steeply, with the result that total income is now down by 13 per cent on the figure just a few years ago. In order to minimize the effects of this loss, NERC is making energetic efforts to find non-governmental contract research. A Research Marketing Group has been established within the past year for just this purpose, although it has not yet had time to make any significant contribution to NERC's coffers. Dr Keith Harrap, director of the marketing group, says that most of his likely customers are to be found overseas, so NERC is planning to tout its services in Brussels and in Washington (where the World Bank may have work to offer). The marketing group also hopes shortly to secure a major contract to investigate marine pollution in Oman.

Meanwhile, NERC has maintained the value of the research it supports in universities, despite the overall contraction. Acid rain is, of course, now a boom area. Owing to the reductions in universities' recurrent grants, however, the number of applicants for research funds has increased dramatically, with the result that many more of them had to be turned away last year than previously. The council is hoping to hold steady the value of university research in future years, in line with general recommendations made to the research councils two years ago.

On the vexed question of achieving the right balance between university and in-house research, Sir Hermann says: "I do not think that it is possible . . . for us to step into the breach left by the weakness of the other pillar of the dual support system. In fact, I think it is debatable whether . . . we should even attempt to do so."

The projected level funding for university-based research has had to be paid for in NERC's own institutes. The main research areas that have been hit are conservation studies, pest control and, in the geological field, production of a series of six-inches-to-the-mile geological maps. The council also reports that it failed to convince the government of the need for more research on atmospheric carbon dioxide. Two stations of the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology are to be closed, and staff at two laboratories run by the Institute of Oceanographic Sciences may be relocated. One possibility the council is considering is that it might establish a

number of multi-institute sites.

NERC participates in several international research projects, but problems over exchange rates may curtail some of them. British participation in deep sea drilling remains uncertain after the Deep Sea Drilling Project ends this month.

One research area where NERC can be optimistic, however, is the British Antarctic Survey. After the hostilities in the South Atlantic last year, government support for the survey was increased, and new buildings have now been constructed at Halley Station, to replace those being crushed under several years' weight of accumulated snow. NERC expects to be able to maintain, if not increase, opportunities for university scientists wishing to work in the Antarctic.

Tim Beardsley

Dutch science

Ministry plans intervention

The Hague

THE conservative coalition government of the Netherlands seems devoted, like the Thatcher Government in Britain and the Reagan Government in the United States, to less government — but with a single exception: science. Or so it seems to many Dutch scientists, who are now beginning to organize resistance to a measure which they consider will "politicize" the Dutch basic research council ZWO.

The minister of education and science, Mr Wim Deetman believes that the Dfl 200 million (£45-million) a year ZWO has hitherto been too independent, serving the interests of Dutch scientists but not of the economy. In his view it has been too protective, not selective enough. But ZWO director Professor van Lieshout counters that ZWO has been restricted by a statute which explicitly prevents it from carrying out applied research. "We would love to do applied research," he said last week.

Applied research ZWO will now do, according to the minister's draft statute for the organization; and it will merge with its smaller sister (the Dfl 12 million a year STW) for that purpose. Thus far, there is agreement. According to the chairman of the influential Dutch Council for Science Policy (RAVW), Professor van Bueren, "we are quite agreed that science must help the government in health and the economy and so on". But the question, says van Bueren, is "how far should it go". For according to the minister's proposals, political factors would become obtrusive.

At present, ZWO is headed by the president and a 40-strong council chosen by the ministry from a list of nominees put forward by each university and by other groups. In selecting the council, the ministry relies on advice from the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (RAAS) which has in the past been "rather influential" according to van Lieshout.

In future, however, the minister's pro-

posal would do away with the council and RAAS would have no role in selecting ZWO officials. Instead, the minister will directly appoint the 11-strong executive board, which is now chosen by the council without supervision. Moreover, the minister will also appoint the sub-boards — the five committees that are closest to the work-face of science, managing ZWO's various areas of work. Without the council, which met three or four times a year and approved — or disapproved — the ZWO budget as proposed by the board, power in ZWO would be much more centralized, van Bueren believes, and would be centralized in political hands.

All in all, this open disagreement, which will finish only when a final proposal goes to cabinet in the spring of 1984, appears to be one more painful step in a determined government programme to take closer control of the academic establishment in the Netherlands. Thus in the universities, budgets are being cut some 4 per cent a year over the next four years, professorial posts axed by 5 per cent a year (100 will retire next year when the compulsory retirement age is reduced from 70 to 65) and government money will be allocated for the first time according to research "programmes" assessed (somewhat at present) by the ministry.

However Dutch universities, on the admission of their own staff, have long been "the richest in the world", receiving more unearmarked support for research than universities anywhere else. Hitherto, ZWO has provided only some 7-10 per cent of academic research support, the rest coming direct from the ministry to the university, for redistribution locally. Among governments that channel academic research support by more than one route, the Dutch has stood out for the freedom given to universities.

Robert Walgate