

British science budget

More money will buy less

NEXT year's budget for British science is a disappointment, not least for the research councils. Planned provision for education and science in 1984-85, announced in the House of Commons last week by Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, will increase by 4 per cent in cash terms, less than the inflation rate.

The science budget, out of which the five research councils receive most of their income, will be £549 million, 6 per cent more than in this financial year and £6.5 million more than was foreseen in the government's March expenditure white paper. But almost all the extra is earmarked to meet the cost of international subscriptions, which chiefly affects the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC). Otherwise the budget remains roughly constant in real terms.

The recurrent grant to the universities channelled through the University Grants Committee is planned to be £1,265 million for the academic year 1984-85, a cash increase of 4.4 per cent over the current academic year.

The science budget will be divided between the research councils on the basis of recommendations by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) next month, when it will publish suggested allocations for 1984-85 and the two following years. But it is clear that Sir David Phillips, the council's chairman, has been largely unsuccessful in his bid for extra funds to pay for restructuring programmes planned for the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

ABRC had asked for £35 million above the £543 million originally planned for next year to allow for "the continuation and development of existing policies". Sir Keith was apparently unimpressed: apart from the £6 million offered for international subscriptions, his response was a paltry £0.5 million, to cover restructuring costs.

The changes planned for the Agricultural and Food Research Council, for example, will require about £5 million next year and twice that amount in the two following years. In 1985-86, there may be some shifting of this burden onto SERC and the Medical Research Council, but for next year at least, ABRC plans do not envisage any major shift of funds towards AFRC and NERC. The inescapable consequence is that both will have to indulge in some drastic pruning in their own institutes in order to meet commitments to maintain university-based research.

The Treasury, as expected, has accepted the principle that Britain must collaborate with other nations in "big science" projects. The question of how SERC is to meet the spiralling cost of subscriptions to organizations such as the European

Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and the European Space Agency (ESA) has been the subject of a special review by a departmental committee under the chairmanship of Miss J. Kelley, an Under-Secretary at the Treasury. While recognizing the Kelley recommendation as a small victory, some SERC council members are worried that the amount provided will still be inadequate. The value of sterling has fallen over the past year, while the cost of subscriptions based on gross domestic product has increased. As a result, current estimates are that SERC needs an extra £10 million.

The argument within SERC on the balance between "big" and "little" science will certainly be fuelled by the recognition that the council therefore appears likely to

face a cut in real terms of something like 2 per cent. It is already known that ABRC bids for funds for a British-led space programme and for more university grants have fallen on stony ground. As SERC's financial position was already precarious, some members now fear that SERC laboratories will have to close and staff be made redundant so as to pay for closures in the institutes of other research councils.

The universities' recurrent grant is a small reduction, in real terms, from the present year's total. This comparison, however, disguises the fact that this year's total was reduced by £24 million in July, because university restructuring was costing less than had been expected. Mr John Akker, general secretary of the Association of University Teachers, said last week that he was nevertheless relieved that the total will be enough so that compulsory redundancies should be avoidable in the year ahead. **Tim Beardsley**

Testing laboratories

UK presses for agreement

"MADE in Britain" will once again be something to boast about if new government initiatives to be announced this week succeed. A major publicity campaign will be launched to persuade industrial companies to make more and better use of recognized engineering standards and quality assurance procedures in product design and manufacture.

The start of the campaign coincides with the government's response to a report published last year* by the Advisory Council for Applied Research and Development (ACARD) on the impact of technical standards and regulations on product design and international competition. ACARD found that the existing schemes of the British Standards Institution are patchily developed and under-used. Conformity is often claimed fraudulently, and British standards are not widely accepted overseas. Unlike most industrial countries, Britain has few government-supported certification and approval schemes (those that exist are mostly concerned with safety) and industry is consequently unused to operating within such frameworks.

ACARD concluded that, despite the provisions of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the Treaty of Rome, some foreign governments were at least acquiescing in allowing technical standards to be deployed as obstacles to free trade. ACARD urged that industry and government should introduce more certification and approval schemes, particularly for internationally tradeable products. It advised the government to establish a national accreditation scheme for certification and approval bodies, to operate some controlled national mark for quality. Most of ACARD's recommendations will be accepted and implemented by the

government.

The new initiative will try to convince industrial companies that exports can be improved by demonstrating conformity with local approval criteria. There is widespread ignorance and disregard of such guidelines in Britain, and the technical help for exporters offered by the British Standards Institution is over-priced and under-used. Smaller companies, in particular, often fail to take into account the technical requirements of overseas countries at a sufficiently early stage in the development of a product, so that expensive redesigning becomes necessary.

When a product does satisfy certification or approval requirements, manufacturers complain that overseas customers will not accept British laboratory reports, so tests have to be repeated — often at considerable expense — abroad. These complaints were the spur to a scheme which now accredits testing laboratories in Britain with a view to establishing wider recognition of their reports.

The International Laboratory Accreditation Conference (ILAC) has for a number of years been working towards greater international acceptance of test results, and at its meeting in Prague earlier this month the conference was told that a memorandum of understanding had been signed between the US National Bureau of Standards and the British National Physical Laboratory, providing for mutual recognition of their respective test laboratory accreditation schemes.

The British scheme, NATLAS, has been in operation for only two years but already covers more than 200 laboratories in the fields of mechanical, electrical, physical and chemical testing. In the United States, the equivalent scheme is the National Voluntary Accreditation Program