

UK research councils

Staffing levels blamed for waste

BRITISH research councils and the Department of Education and Science (DES) are taken to task this week for laxity in their manpower planning. An investigation by the National Audit Office, an independent body answerable directly to parliament, concludes that DES carries out no systematic scrutiny of manpower controls in the four large research councils, while the councils themselves fail to keep track of their scientific manpower needs. Unexplained increases in the proportion of higher grade posts at three research councils during the past 10 years have added £5 million to the annual civil science salary bill.

The National Audit Office, which is headed by the Comptroller and Auditor General, examined manpower controls in a wide range of public bodies that are at least partly funded by DES. The research councils, together with the British Library and British Museum, account for a high proportion of DES expenditure in such "non-departmental public bodies" and salaries soak up almost one-third of the total of £728 million spent in 1982-83. The research councils have their own staff inspection teams but do not apply standard guidelines to scientific staff.

Now the audit office questions whether the research councils have been doing the job properly. Only the Agricultural and Food Research Council and the Medical Research Council have been taking the trouble to keep DES informed of their staff in post (although it seems they could have saved themselves the time: the Comptroller and Auditor General points out that DES appears to make no use of the returns anyway). And although all the research councils have staff inspection units that are independent of line management, weaknesses of planning and coverage and poor record-keeping have made it difficult to be sure when recommendations had been followed.

Innovative scientific staff in research councils, whose work involves an exceptional degree of originality and creativity, are allowed to enjoy "fluid grading" — meaning that the work done itself depends on the occupant of a post, so that a fixed grading structure is inappropriate. The research councils have maintained that their own scientific assessments of staff gradings are adequate to keep these in line with staff gradings in the scientific civil service, and DES, hampered by a lack of staff competent to inspect scientific posts, has been inclined to leave well alone. The resulting impasse has led to anomalies.

The audit office examined staff in post at the Science and Engineering Research Council, the Natural Environment Research Council and the Agricultural and Food Research Council. There were

considerable variations in grade ratio between councils and between individual establishments, and the Comptroller appears sceptical of the explanations offered for these differences and the upward drift of gradings. The inspection of non-scientific staff by research councils is less muddled, but DES appears not to make systematic use of the information it is given.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report will be examined by at a meeting of the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons later this month. The

Soviet emigrants**Goldfarb's becomes test case**

SIXTEEN leading Western biochemists and geneticists have appealed to the Soviet Academy of Sciences on behalf of Dr David Goldfarb, their colleague, whose exit visa for Israel was withdrawn by the KGB a few days before he was due to emigrate (see *Nature* 26 April, p.766). Dr Goldfarb is now under investigation in Moscow for allegedly trying to take with him material of importance to Soviet national security.

The KGB has confiscated Goldfarb's professional files and notes and also his collection of bacterial strains — auxotrophic mutants of *Escherichia coli* K-12 which he collected in the mid-1960s, most of which originated from the laboratory of Dr William Hayes, then at the Hammersmith Hospital, London, from Dr Yanofski's laboratory in the United States and from Dr Kunicki-Gurfinkel's in Warsaw. Only two of the strains were selected in the Soviet Union. All of them have been deposited with the two Soviet collections at the Institute of General Genetics of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and at the Moscow Regional Research Institute of Clinical Medicine, where they are available on request to any microbiologist and, ironically, were also sent to a British laboratory in the early 1970s.

Goldfarb's work with these strains, which dealt with the use of auxotrophic strains of *Escherichia coli* as indicators of amino acids in human urine and blood plasma, is well known in the West and was even the subject of an article in the *New York Times* in 1970.

When Dr Goldfarb attempted to explain all this to the KGB, the investigating officer is believed to have replied that Goldfarb might be taking out secret strains disguised as innocuous ones. A campaign for greater "vigilance" has been instigated in Dr Goldfarb's former laboratory.

In an appeal to Dr Anatolii Aleksandrov, president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and to Dr Yurii Ovchinnikov, a vice-president who has several times gone on record that Goldfarb's work has no defence-related implications, Dr

committee is widely regarded as one of the most influential of Commons committees, and Members of Parliament are unlikely to hear the audit office's criticisms in silence. Most of the criticism is likely to be levelled at DES, which is supposed to take overall responsibility for overseeing manpower planning, even though individual institutions make their own detailed plans. Besides being told generally to pull its socks up, DES is instructed by the Comptroller to ensure that the fluid grading system of promotion in the research councils does not lead to a lowering of standards or the undertaking of work of higher quality than is needed.

Tim Beardsley

Goldfarb's colleagues in the West say that the harassment of Dr Goldfarb, and the seizure of his material by the secret police, is a "blatant violation of basic norms essential for the pursuit of science and international scientific cooperation. We urge you to consider the implications of similar constraints being imposed on the flow of information and materials used in basic biological research from other countries to the USSR." The appeal also asks that the Soviet Government should understand that Professor Goldfarb is being "watched with great attention by the members of the international scientific community, it is considered a test case of the willingness of the Soviet Government to comply with the principles of international scientific cooperation. Continued harassment of Dr Goldfarb will lead to grave consequences for further scientific cooperation with your country. We are prepared to take a strong public stand on behalf of Dr Goldfarb, although we hope that at this stage the problem can be resolved in a quiet way."

The signatories of the appeal are André Lwoff, Francois Jacob, François Gros, Ellie Wollman (Institut Pasteur, Paris); Sir Peter Medawar (Clinical Research Centre, UK); Sydney Brenner, Aaron Klug, Max Perutz (MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology, Cambridge); R. R. Porter (University of Oxford), Werner Arber (Basel), Joshua Lederer (Rockefeller University), Paul Berg, Arthur Kornberg (Stanford University), Salvador Luria, David Baltimore (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Gunther S. Stent (University of California, Berkeley).

Vera Rich

Plant conservation — a correction

CONTRARY to the implication in the article on p.577 of *Nature* 12 April, the two databases at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, are entirely separate. SEPASAT is a Kew initiative funded by Oxfam; neither IUCN nor the IUCN rare plant database receives Oxfam funds. □