

British research council

Science council looks for projects to cut

THE British Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) decided at its council meeting last week that it must withdraw from some of the research fields it supports. The council has given itself until February to decide how the pattern of its activities should be reshaped. "Major acts of surgery" are on the cards, according to Professor John Kingman, chairman of the council, speaking after the council meeting.

By Kingman's account, the council is now at a "turning point" in its affairs. Since this time last year, when the British Government refused the request from the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) to provide more money for research, Kingman says the council has seen trouble coming. While the total research budget has been formally indexed against inflation, Kingman says that for various reasons it is being eroded by several per cent a year.

Among the council's immediate difficulties is a demand by ABRC that it should contribute £7 million towards the cost of reorganization at the Agricultural and Food Research Council, which is having to close a number of institutes under financial pressure. Kingman says he is "bitterly disappointed" that no extra help has been provided on this account. But the council has also been further hit by a decline in the value of sterling in the past few months, and by improvements of some university salaries (to which many post-doctoral stipends are tied).

Kingman says that with this project, the choice is between uniform cuts across the board and "more radical decisions" that will entail pulling out of some activities. For much of the past year, a group of council members and officials has been considering what steps of this kind might be taken, and what the financial savings would be. One conclusion is that a decision to shut down an institution or to abandon a research programme will yield full savings only over a period of five years. This is why, Kingman says, the impending cuts are meant to increase flexibility only in the 1990s.

For the time being, nobody is prepared to guess what will be cut. At pains to forestall the rumour mills, Kingman last week emphasized that the period between now and February will be used for a re-examination of the research programmes supported by the council's four spending boards (responsible for nuclear and high-energy physics, astronomy and space, engineering and general science). Each board will be expected by February to have "gone back to square one", and to present

a new case for its claim on council funds. Kingman says that at last week's council meeting, he asked for and was given an assurance by the four board chairmen that they accept the need for a radical reappraisal.

The task of listing projects and institutions that might be abandoned, and of working out the savings that may result, will fall on SERC officials overseen by a steering group appointed by the council. It seems to be accepted that there will be no time for full consultation with those affected before decisions must be made in February, although Kingman says that there will still then be a need for individual boards to choose between options that will have been presented to them.

This tight timetable, which may be changed, is conditioned by the need that the council should disclose to ABRC its spending plans by next April, at the beginning of the next financial year. SERC hopes that the Kendrew committee's recommendation on continued membership of CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) will be available by February, but "if not we shall have to do our own study". Pulling out of high-energy physics would "be an easy option" but could not give the council the flexibility it needs — it would merely "buy time" for perhaps five years.

Kingman is not hopeful that significant economies can arise from changed

relationships with other research councils. He considers that there should be a closer relationship between SERC and the Natural Environment Research Council, however, and that ABRC should give thought to British support for research in biology. Economies through European collaboration accrue only when partners have money to contribute to joint projects.

Although the British Government's allocation of funds for 1985-86 and thereafter could still be increased above the amount forecast last December, nobody seems to think it likely that there will be a last-minute change of heart. Kingman last week also complained that last year's agreement with the Treasury about compensation for the depreciation of sterling, which yielded £7 million out of a total shortfall of £10 million, would have to be negotiated all over again this year, perhaps this time unsuccessfully.

The council seems to be entirely serious in its intentions. Professor Kingman last week quoted ABRC evidence to a House of Commons committee in support of his estimate that SERC would be £70 million short by the end of the decade (in a budget then estimated at £280 million a year). He said nevertheless that he welcomed the strategy document from the University Grants Committee, promising increased selectivity if "the other half of the dual-support system were properly managed".

On the question whether the council could have made its decisions sooner, Kingman said the investigation of what might be done had started a year ago, but that council would then probably have been unable to accept the need for the tough decisions it had now, in worsened circumstances, recognized to be necessary.

John Maddox

Medical shoestring pared down

A FURTHER drawing-in of horns in support for academic research in Britain is forecast in a letter from the secretary of the UK Medical Research Council (MRC), Sir James Gowans, to vice-chancellors of British universities. The letter, published last week, says that the council has no choice but to reduce the funds available for meeting project grant applications in the coming financial year by 7.5 per cent. Programme grants, used for supporting longer term projects, sometimes of a more open-ended character, are to be reduced by 25 per cent, while the funds available for paying stipends to postgraduate students and trainees will be reduced by no less than 30 per cent.

The council's letter, an unusual advertisement of its financial problems, explains that part of the reason for the substantial cut in prospect is the contribution, of about £2 million, that MRC will be required to make to the cost of reorganizing the Agricultural and Food Research Council. But it seems that the extra cost of university

salaries, which affect the council's budget for expenditure already agreed by increasing automatically the salaries of research fellows, will cost the council more than £1 million next year.

As might be expected, the council's letter says that these further economies are made with regret. It also says that if there is some alleviation in the financial position, perhaps because the government accepts its case that its budget should be increased, it may be possible to increase the sums available for next year.

The surprise is that the council should have gone so far as to say that its case for extra money has been urged on the government, in the persons of the Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, and the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Sir Keith Joseph, by the secretary of MRC and its chairman, Lord Jellicoe. From the evidence of the latter now published, the meetings were particularly joyless even as these occasions go.

John Maddox