

UK research budget

Government promises redirection of extra funds

THE British government has found an extra £24 million for the support of academic research in the next financial year and that succeeding. This was announced on Monday this week by Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, who said that the science budget (used chiefly for the support of the research councils) would be increased by £14 million and that the University Grants Committee would have an extra £10 million to spend on equipment (compared with the present £90 million).

Sir Keith said on Monday that his objective has been, within a budget for education and science which is essentially unchanged, to redirect funds towards research "which is in urgent need". One measure of his commitment is that the extra funds have been found by increasing the contributions well-to-do parents will be expected to make towards the cost of their children's higher education. The minimum maintenance grant for students from better-off families is to be abolished from the next academic year, and parents will be expected to contribute towards tuition fees up to a maximum of £525 a year.

Within the science establishment, the chief beneficiaries are likely to be the science and medical research councils, which had been expecting to contribute towards the cost of reorganization elsewhere in the coming financial year. But Sir Keith said on Monday that it would be for the Advisory Board for the Research Councils to recommend the precise division of the spoils. The extra £10 million for university equipment is to be spent "in a few carefully-selected centres of research".

Sir Keith's conviction of the urgency of the need for extra research funds stems, by his statement on Monday, from "talking to people" but also from reading the report of a committee under Sir Jack Lewis, the Cambridge physical chemist, that detailed the proportions of high-quality research applications being turned down for lack of funds by the Science and Engineering Research Council (*Nature* 310, 267; 1984).

Whether the extra funds will satisfy the research councils or their needs is another matter. The Science and Engineering Research Council has been saying that its budget would have to increase by £70 million by the end of the decade simply to sustain present activities. It also became plain this week that there is no general understanding that the research councils should be protected against the effect of currency fluctuations.

The universities are likely to be equally disappointed by the fixed recurrent budget

which, after allowing for the upward drift of salaries means a reduction of resources by between 0.5 and 1.0 per cent a year.

SERC annual report

Council puts on brave face

THE UK Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) gave no sign last week, on the publication of its report for 1983-84, of the turmoil behind the scenes, as a network of committees embarks on cutting the council's activities to fit within its budget. Professor John Kingman, the unruffled chairman, highlighted British involvement in the Infra-Red Astronomy Satellite, the discovery of intermediate bosons at CERN and SERC's teaching company scheme.

Since its inception in 1976, the scheme, involving a collaboration between universities and industry whose results tend to be directly measurable by increased manufacturing efficiency, has grown considerably. By 1988, the number of individual schemes will have increased to 235 at an annual cost of £11.2 million, of which £3.7 million will be borne by the companies involved.

The teaching company scheme is one of the successes of the council's engineering board, whose share of council spending is set to increase from 18.1 per cent in the financial year 1979-80 to 28.1 per cent in

What to abandon?

How likely is it that Britain will pull out of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) — so saving SERC its £32-million annual subscription? One scenario being canvassed last week was that the SERC committee reviewing CERN membership, headed by molecular biologist Sir John Kendrew, would recommend withdrawal but that the government would reject the proposal because of the political symbolism of CERN as one of the few working European institutions.

But this is not very likely, says John Kingman, SERC chairman. He offered another more frightening scenario last week. Kendrew might recommend, hypothesized Kingman, SERC should stay in CERN. But the SERC council might have to overturn the Kendrew recommendation and get out of CERN anyhow. Kingman thinks the political objections to leaving CERN would be balanced by the advantages of using some of the money released to join a new European project — the European Synchrotron Radiation Source.

Robert Walgate

In late September, the grants committee offered its opinion that a continuation of this pattern would soon make it necessary to think of closing "one or more" universities. Sir Keith said on Monday that he did not accept this outcome as inevitable, and that the study of academic efficiency mounted by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals could yet show that there were substantial economies to be made in higher education. □

1987-88. Over the same period, the percentage expenditure of the other boards will have uniformly decreased. Concern at these trends may have been in the mind of the chairman of the nuclear physics board, Professor D. Colley, when he remarked last week that total support for applied research from a variety of sources far outweighs that for basic science, provided solely by SERC. Thus further shifts towards applied research by SERC would be out of proportion to the damage they would cause to basic research. Professor Kingman had earlier emphasized, however, that engineering research was not synonymous with applied research.

Another shift in SERC's priorities is marked by the approaching end of an era in which large facilities have been constructed. All future large facilities are expected to be developed on an international basis.

As a result, it is expected that funds may be released towards recurrent expenditure on project grants. Such funds are likely to be badly needed. Professor Kingman repeated a remark made by the chairman of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, Sir David Phillips, to the effect that the level of UK scientific activity seems likely to decrease by 25 per cent over the next decade.

Professor Kingman emphasized last week that, although final responsibility rests with the council, use would be made of peer review. The process would be "loosely coupled" with that of the University Grants Committee, which is also embarking on a re-examination of its support for science. Professor J. Cadogan, chairman of the science board, emphasized that, although four months seems a short time to reach such decisions, the council has been reviewing its programmes for a variety of reasons over recent years, and so is reasonably equipped for such a task.

When asked what amount of money would solve his problems, Professor Kingman said that SERC's proportion of the gross national product peaked in 1971-72 and has declined ever since, implying a current lack of £25 million or so. But just a guarantee from the government of continued support on the present scale, he said, would leave SERC in a much stronger position.

Philip Campbell