

British Technology Group

UK technology transfer grows

THE British Technology Group (BTG) last week announced its annual results for NRDC (National Research Development Corporation) and NEB (National Enterprise Board). Both companies announced healthy profits, but for different reasons.

NRDC and NEB are independent organizations, coordinated by BTG, which cooperate to promote technology transfer. NRDC has two aims: to discover and initiate commercially viable projects in academic institutions, and to enter joint ventures with companies needing advice or assistance to apply technology, sharing profits in both cases. In 1984/5, NRDC received 480 applications from academic researchers, of which 301 were followed up and 149 are being actively pursued.

Until this year, NRDC had the right of first refusal on all public sector inventions, but the government has now withdrawn this privilege. Although NRDC has received slightly fewer applications as a result, the number of projects it is following up has not fallen, nor, it claims, has the standard of those it accepts.

In practice, NRDC has never enforced its right, so NRDC is not expecting great changes as a result of the ruling. However, because of potential competition from the private sector, it has set out to increase its "market awareness", publicizing itself to academic institutions, improving terms on offer to researchers, increasing the number of its liaison team and speeding up decisions on projects.

BTG does not see itself as being in direct competition with the private sector for contracts with researchers because of the "venture capital gap" (the time between setting up a project and beginning to get a return), an interval that investment companies are unlikely to provide for. BTG sees venture capital companies as potential collaborators, rather than rivals, for whichever of its projects (currently 367) develop into good commercial propositions. One obvious candidate for investment is Agricultural Genetics Ltd, in which NRDC has a 25 per cent shareholding. This company has been operating for a year and has no publicly defined goals as yet, but is likely to produce future profits in areas such as plant growth hormones.

NEB, in contrast to NRDC, is in the selling business. Since late 1983 it has been selling off all its assets, resulting in a pre-tax profit of £52 million for 1984/5 compared with £0.2 million the previous year. In the past year, 17 companies have been disposed of completely, 8 have partially gone and the remaining 56 will disappear over the next two years or so. The future of NEB after that depends entirely on the political climate in what is likely to be an election year.

Maxine Clarke

Polish universities

No freedoms next term

LAST week, the Polish Sejm (Parliament) finally passed a package of amendments to the 1982 Higher Education Act that, in the opinion of the academic community, will virtually annul the university autonomy gained in the Solidarity period. A total of 327 deputies voted for the amendments, 5 against and there were 9 abstentions.

A last-minute attempt by an independent deputy, Edmund Osmanczyk, to have the vote on the amendments deferred to the next session of the Sejm was rejected. (A general election is scheduled for 13 October). Speaking against the amendments, Osmanczyk stated that the draft tabled by the government had not taken into account the objections of the academic community as expressed by its elected representative body, the Main Council for Higher Education. Ignoring the council's opinion, said Osmanczyk, would amount to a highly immoral end to the present Sejm, and would store up trouble for the future.

Osmanczyk's complaint that the opinion of the universities had been ignored was criticized by some deputies from the ruling Polish United Worker's Party who said that the draft had been submitted to "broad public consideration". They ignored the fact that public opinion was overwhelmingly against the amendments and that the government, after formally inviting public discussion, ignored the result of that discussion. Nor did they mention the fact that the "public discussion" was conducted under somewhat difficult conditions, with the participants having to base their opinions on what were referred to as "rumours" (reports in the underground press), since the government drafts were never published in the official media.

During the Sejm debate, government spokesmen adopted the line that the amendments will not limit academic autonomy, but will simply plug a few loopholes in the 1982 act which had allowed it to be exploited by "anti-socialist elements" to "destabilize" the universities. This led to some remarkable examples of "newspeak" from the Minister of Science and Higher Education, Dr Benon Miskiewicz. According to his definition, the virtual elimination of student and junior staff participation in the university self-governance process actually makes it more democratic, since self-governance will now be exercised by senior tenured professors and assistant professors "who assume the highest responsibility for the results of research and teaching". As for the Main Council for Science and Higher Education, the 70-strong representative body elected by the universities to voice their views to the government, it does not, said Miskiewicz, represent the opinion held by the entire academic milieu but

only "individual circles and groups".

In view of the vacation, reaction from the academic community has been diffuse. The reactor of Warsaw University, Dr Kazimierz Bialkowski, has reportedly refused to comment, while one of his pro-rectors told the media, "If I say nothing, it will be bad, and if I say something it will be worse!".

Informal sampling of opinion in the main university centres suggests an atmosphere of suppressed anger that may well spread when the universities reopen in the autumn. Osmanczyk's warning of future trouble, and the warning of the Main Council, last November, that the amendments will be more likely to cause than to prevent destabilization, seem likely to prove true.

Vera Rich

Hoxha's posthumous science policy

A TWO-VOLUME collection, *On Science*, by the late leader of Albania, Enver Hoxha, has just been published in Tirana. According to the official Albanian news agency ATA, the book reflects "the correct and far-sighted policy of the Party and the theoretical scientific Marxist Leninist thought of Enver Hoxha on the development of science . . . the technical-scientific revolution in Albania, and on how to put these to the service of the revolution".

This policy envisages science and technological innovation as a major activity of the working masses (it is claimed that over 3,000 significant pieces of research were carried out last year in Albanian factories and farms), and the rapid development of mining and heavy industry (leaving agriculture and civil engineering virtually at the pick-and-shovel stage). Hoxha also proposed an intensive campaign to increase the birthrate (with a target of 3 million inhabitants of Albania by the end of the century), coupled with a major campaign to get women into industry and a programme of self-sufficiency.

Judging from the ATA reports, the book seems to have been compiled posthumously as part of a campaign of tribute which has led to the renaming, in Hoxha's honour, of virtually every important institution in the country from Tirana University downwards. Accordingly, although, in the words of ATA, the book contains "writings that are models of scientific study and work", it also contains a significant amount of previously unpublished material. Since, during his lifetime, every major speech and pronouncement of Hoxha's was published as a matter of course, this material must consist of minor pieces, included to increase the collection to the size of a major work.

Vera Rich