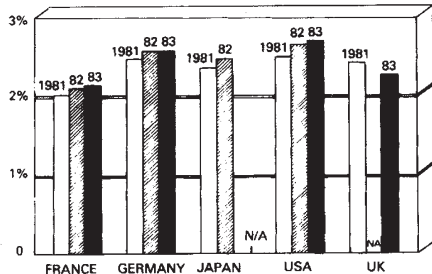


UK research councils

Science council thinks ahead

BRITISH academic astronomers are seeking to persuade the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) to transfer the staffs of the two UK observatories to university research centres. So much has emerged in the past week, in advance of the publication of the SERC "corporate plan", published earlier this week. The plan says that one of the many questions



Expenditure on R&D as percentage of GDP 1981-83.

still unresolved about its future is that of the two observatories, the Royal Greenwich Observatory at Herstmonceux in Sussex and the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, whose present functions are chiefly those of providing ground support for British telescopes at La Palma in the Canary Islands and on Hawaii.

Astronomers at the University of Cambridge advocate that SERC should establish a centre for astronomy in Cambridge to which a substantial part of the staff from Greenwich would be transferred. One of the other contenders is the University of Manchester, whose case is based on the commonality of interest between the radioastronomers of Jodrell Bank and those at Edinburgh concerned with the millimetre telescope on Hawaii.

These arguments will presumably be adjudicated by the committee under Sir John Kingman, chairman of SERC until last October, which is looking into the future of the two observatories.

The emergence of these proposals is an illustration of the difficulties faced by SERC in trying to match its future organization to its expected budget. Its plan is more a restatement of familiar problems than a resolution of them.

The starting point is the council's statement that its work is at present limited by the shortage of funds, with the result that many good projects cannot be supported. SERC on this occasion points to increasing competition in basic research not only "by the USA and Japan, but by France and Germany". The plan argues that science has "an exponential dynamic", implying that discovery creates new needs, and says that external constraints on its operations at present are "too severe".

For the immediate future, SERC says

that it hopes by 1989 to release an extra £18 million a year from its own resources. The most urgent use of the funds, the plan says, is for the direct support of universities. As well as seeking a reduced subscription to the CERN laboratory at Geneva, SERC intends to reduce spending on support for high-energy physics by a fifth. On space research, the council says that it will concentrate its support for the European Space Agency on projects in basic research, and that its intended participation in the British National Space Centre will not persuade it, "at least for

the time being", to increase spending.

Among the other casualties of planning within restraint are the proposed upgrading of the tandem accelerator at Oxford. Ultimately, SERC says, it will also want to reduce its involvement in the Institute Laue - Langevin at Grenoble, although it hopes before then to have reached agreement with other European research councils for international participation in the Spallation Neutron Source at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in exchange for British participation in the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility. □

British research

A little more all round

SIR Keith Joseph, British Secretary of State for Education and Science, this week announced the science budget for the next financial year (see table). Sir Keith has accepted the advice of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC), which each year tells the government how it thinks the money

Government expenditure on British research (£ million)

	1985-86	1986-87	Increase (per cent)
AFRC	50.3	52.7	4.7
ESRC	23.6	23.6	0
MRC	122.3	128.3	4.9
NERC	67.3	70.3	4.5
SERC	298.0	315.5	5.9
British Museum (Natural History)	16.2	17.2	6.2
Royal Society	5.9	6.4	8.5
Others		0.6	
Total for 1986-87		614.6	

should be divided. The only part of ABRC's advice that Sir Keith rejected was that the Department of Health and Social Security should bear the full costs of establishing a centre for coordinating epidemiological research on acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). Although the health department may pay up to £0.3 million to the centre, Sir Keith has firmly told the Medical Research Council (MRC) to meet the balance of the costs of the centre from its allocation.

The total science budget for 1986-87 includes an extra £15 million that Sir Keith pulled out of his hat last month. ABRC has recommended, and Sir Keith agreed, that of the new money, the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) should receive £2.5 million for "new initiatives in its institutes", MRC £2.5 million for research grants and programmes, the Natural Environment Research Council

(NERC) £1.9 million, the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) £6 million to support "strategic research of industrial relevance" and the rest will enhance ABRC's "flexibility margin".

ABRC intends to produce a strategy document next year to take account of the corporate plans of each research council (see above). It will also change its normal schedule so that it will consider both the overall financial position of the science budget and the relative positions and claims of the individual research bodies in one exercise in March 1986.

The only body not to receive an increase in funds for 1986-87 in Sir Keith's statement is the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The council is unlikely to be too distressed at the news; this is the first time in four years that its budget has not been cut. ESRC has taken seriously its brief from ABRC to toughen up; last month it took the controversial decision to blacklist any institution in which ten per cent of research students failed to submit a thesis within four years, and deny them the right to apply for any more grants for two years. Fourteen such institutions were blacklisted and given until last week to appeal. ESRC has now considered those appeals, and this week announced that five institutions have been reinstated for various reasons, including inaccurate statistics, failure to inform ESRC of withdrawal and two administrative errors.

Kings College London (KQC), Leeds Polytechnic, the University of London Institute of Education, University College of Wales (Swansea) and UMIST have gained reprieves. But Queen's University Belfast, the Universities of East Anglia, Liverpool, Aston and Dundee, Manchester Business School, Sheffield Polytechnic and Paisley College of Technology have failed to persuade ESRC to reverse its decision.

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