

OECD indicators

Science statistics prove slippery

RESULTS for 1983 and data for a few countries for 1984–85 suggest a “definite slowing down” of research and development spending in the industrialized countries, according to the latest “science and technology indicators” report* by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Some doubts remain about the figures. The rate at which data are accumulated, checked and reported by governments means that most data in the OECD tables end in 1983 and the latest trends are hard to spot. Between 1979 and 1983, research and development expenditure in the OECD states (most of the non-Communist industrial world from the United States to Japan) had been rising rapidly.

Other points made by the OECD study are that up to 1983:

- Research and development became

more concentrated in the largest countries.

- Japanese research and development grew faster than that in any other country.
- The United States remained the largest research performer, with the countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) second.
- Japan spent “substantially less” than the EEC countries in total.
- Research and development kept pace with or exceeded economic growth in most countries. Exceptions are Switzerland, Australia and the United Kingdom during 1981–83.
- Most OECD government funding went to defence and space programmes.
- Basic research received about 15 per cent of total OECD research and development funds in 1981.
- Industry increased its role in relation to government as a research and development spender, except in Switzerland.

The value of OECD’s figures on higher education research is questionable, however, according to a British research team which has just reported to the British Advisory Board to the Research Councils (ABRC). The report will not be published until the autumn, but its authors have indicated that OECD data are limited by their reliance on national government interpretations of the “Frascati agreement” of the 1960s, which was supposed to codify the reporting and comparison of national research statistics but has since lost its real effectiveness due to changes in institutional structures. Governments may also stretch the meanings of terms to suit their political convenience.

Some of the more glaring problems thrown up by the British work, which relates only to higher education, are in the varying definition of universities, and the attributions of government laboratory spending. Japan, apparently, attributes half of the total budgets (including salaries) of its 1,000 or so colleges, few of which are at full university level, to “research”; and the United States lumps the research of its big defence laboratories such as Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos in with that of the universities. In the DM 20,000 million German university accounts DM 5,000 million is distributed in part as research, but turns out on analysis to be income from hospital beds, through certain medical universities’ private health schemes.

The most anomalous of the six countries analysed by the British group is Japan, but European countries as a whole also suffer in a major way by excluding all international research facilities (such as the Organisation for European Nuclear Research, CERN) from their higher educa-

tion statistics. (The United States, by contrast, includes its big science facilities such as Fermilab in its university figures.)

Altogether, the feeling in British science policy circles is that such anomalies allow the all-powerful Treasury to decry OECD figures which show declining research spending in Britain. That is why an independent, in-depth study was commissioned. It is believed to leave no escape from the conclusion that British research in the higher education sector has indeed been undergoing a relative decline — which is what, of course, everyone knew but could not prove. **Robert Walgate**

Academician’s Berlin arrest riddle

A PUZZLING diplomatic incident involving East and West Germany was resolved on Monday, when the West German authorities decided it would not be in the public interest to prefer charges against Professor Herbert Meissner, deputy general secretary of the East German Academy of Sciences.

Meissner had been on what the East Germans described as a routine business trip to West Berlin, travelling on a diplomatic passport, when he was arrested for shop-lifting. He was subsequently taken to Munich where he was questioned by BND, the West German intelligence service. He then, in some unexplained way, appeared in Bonn, at the East German permanent mission. The head of the mission, Herr Lothar Glienke, then lodged a strong protest at the West German Chancellor’s office.

According to Glienke, the charges against Meissner were totally fabricated, his journey to Munich was “abduction”, and his interview with BND had included the use of pressure and blackmail to try to make him betray his country. Glienke had therefore demanded an immediate guarantee from the chancellor’s office that Meissner would be able to return to East Germany immediately, and that his diplomatic passport and personal papers would be returned.

The West Germans, however, maintain that the shoplifting charge was genuine, and that instead of answering the questions of the West German police, Meissner had demanded to be taken to BND in Munich, saying that he wanted to defect. A spokesman for the West German government, Herr Friedhelm Ost, stated, moreover, that Meissner combined his duties for the academy with work for the East German Ministry of State Security.

Either explanation of Meissner’s movements last week leaves a number of questions unanswered. The West German decision to drop charges will, however, presumably bury these questions in diplomatic obscurity. **Vera Rich**

Getting tough on doctorates

How to make do with little might be thought of as the theme of the new corporate plan from Britain’s Economic and Social Research Council. Taking inflation into account, the £23.6 million budget is lower than it has been for a decade and ways have to be found to be more selective.

The major move is to take £2 million from the budget for postgraduate awards and shift it to research over the next five years. The shift is largely dictated by complaints over the appalling performance of doctoral students supported by the council. Only 20 per cent of students submit theses within four years and around half never write up their research at all.

The council is now to take a tough stand. Institutions where fewer than 10 per cent of students submit theses within four years will be banned from taking on new students for two years. By 1989, 60 per cent of students must submit theses before new funds will be awarded. No action is planned against individual students: supervisors are to be held responsible. One hundred studentships will go over the next two years.

More money is to go into research but the council is to tighten the reins. Expenditure is to be concentrated on “research initiatives” where the council determines what will be done rather than on research grants where researchers choose for themselves. While this gives some assurance of the quality of research, it does, as the plan points out, lessen the chances of throwing up “original ideas with high future value”. Economic and social change in contemporary Britain is the current key research area. **Alun Anderson**