

European research

Applicants galore, but few grants

FOUR out of five applicants for research grants from the European Commission in Brussels fail to get a single ECU, although many of the project proposals are worthy of support, a Commission official warned British hopefuls in London last week. The occasion was organized by the Cabinet Office to give a clearer indication to British scientists and industrialists of the support available from Brussels and how to apply for it.

Apart from the shortfall between good applications and the support available, of which the Commission repeatedly complains when seeking more cash from the

Council of Ministers, there can be long delays before decisions are reached. Successful researchers often receive the cash they need only in the year after they have spent it. The Commission admits its deficiencies and has set in train a programme of 'acceleration and simplification' to tidy up its act.

According to Commission administrator Roderick Hurst, the new 'framework programme' for Commission research and development now before the Council of Ministers will also improve matters by introducing majority voting on individual research programmes, so speeding up the

time between a Commission proposal and final approval by the Council of Ministers.

Hurst says that the most frequent criticisms are of the lack of transparency in decision-making; the complexity of contract conditions (drawn up by Commission lawyers to satisfy the laws of 12 countries); the uncertain timing of calls for proposals (offering grants in specific areas); and the delays in processing and deciding to support particular proposals.

Announcements are made in the *Official Journal* of the European Communities ("which of course you all read"), but also through national Community offices, through government departments and by advertisements in journals. But one recipient of a grant says that the academic grapevine is the best means of communication.

There were a few tips for applicants last week. Nobody in paper-submerged Brussels has time to read 100-page theses, but the brief one-and-a-half page synopsis that applicants are asked to supply is critical, the sole basis for the first weeding out. Because referees may not be fluent in the language in which the synopsis is written, it must be exceptionally clear, but to the Commission it is now also essential that applications involve a collaboration among institutions from two different countries, preferably of different types (for example university and industry).

But having too many partners is impractical, listeners were advised; the usual range is three to five. Applicants, like the good examinees they no doubt often berate for the same fault, must also answer the questions on the form. "It is amazing how many people leave questions unanswered or answer them indirectly", Hurst said. Applications in non-nuclear energy are most likely to succeed (one in three accepted), followed by environment (one in four) and industrial technology (one in six). Biotechnology is at the bottom of the list, with a high demand and a low budget (only one in seven proposals in this field have been accepted).

The British Cabinet Office is preparing a booklet to assist potential applicants. According to a Cabinet Office spokesman, it is "no secret" that Britain was unhappy with the framework programme as presented to ministers earlier this year. The original documentation and legal instruments had not been a satisfactory basis for discussion, he said, though improvements are now hand. The central issue seems to be the British government's wish to apply to the Commission's proposals the disciplines it applies to its own expenditure, he said. **Robert Walgate**

• The commission's presentation has been given at Leeds and Cardiff in the past week and is to be taken to Birmingham (12 November), Belfast (13 November) and Glasgow (15 November).

British research

Postdocs over the hill at thirty?

PREJUDICE in Britain against older researchers is widespread, dissuading many talented people from embarking on postdoctoral research for fear of being ruthlessly discarded within ten years. This is one conclusion from a study by the Association of Researchers in Medicine and Science (ARMS) based on a survey of applicants for recently advertised postdoctoral fellowships.

ARMS says that its survey reveals an unjustifiable prejudice in favour of people younger than 33 years. But far from attracting youth, the prejudice has caused an exodus of British talent abroad, or to other forms of research. The advertisers of the positions were generally disappointed with the number and the quality of the applicants.

The survey covered 200 postdoctoral positions, mostly in biology and medicine, advertised in the principal professional journals during three months from December 1985. ARMS says that fewer than 7 per cent of the positions were for longer than three years. The average duration of the posts on offer was 2.5 years and the average age of those appointed 28.3 years.

Most of all, the association is disturbed by the age distribution of the successful candidates. About a quarter were between 29 and 33 years of age, but only 6 per cent were older than 33. In eight cases, employers complained that many applicants were too old — in their thirties.

The association challenges this preference for younger researchers. It claims that postdoctoral scientists in their thirties are as intelligent, hardworking and competent as in their twenties, but with the advantage of greater knowledge and experience. That they should find themselves trapped in so uncertain and precarious a way of life ironically makes the whole research profession unattractive even to the younger people employers say

they wish to attract, according to ARMS.

The report of the survey includes an account of the reasons given by advertisers of the posts for the few high-quality applicants. The common theme is that better long-term treatment has attracted more researchers to industry.

One, a biochemist from Leeds, said that "anybody in molecular biology who is any good has gone abroad, into industry or has left academic circles ... it is almost impossible to fill university research posts now". Another biochemist, based in London, was astounded at the poor response. Three years ago, he said, a similar advertisement would have attracted more than 40 good applicants, but none of the 13 applicants for the post advertised this year was suitable, and it had to be re-advertised.

A Dundee physiologist endorses this view. The quality of applicants for short-term posts has fallen because career prospects have dwindled. Financial rewards are poor compared with those in industry, and better prospects await those who emigrate to the United States, Europe and Australia.

Professor Peter Campbell, deputy chairman of ARMS and professor of biochemistry at Middlesex Hospital Medical School, has been trying to persuade those who support research to change their attitudes. Campbell argues that research often depends on teams of individuals with a range of abilities and spanning many disciplines. He thinks it proper that such teams should include both people with considerable originality and those with special techniques acquired over many years. But those of the second kind tend to be discarded by the system. Campbell also blames the salary structure in British universities. Because salaries are related to age, he says, researchers often find themselves priced out of posts in their mid-thirties. **Bill Johnstone**