

## British penury relaxed

## Increases for universities just avert disaster

BRITISH universities and the research councils are to benefit from a modest cash injection in the two years from next April. This is their share of a £4,000 million package of spending increases unveiled last week by the government, and widely taken to be part of the preparation for the next general election, which must be held before the spring of 1988.

Although education as a whole receives the lion's share of the whole package, which includes £460 million for the improvement of the pay of teachers in schools, the universities are unimpressed with their share. This amounts to an extra £61 million in 1987-88 and an extra £71 million the following year. The research councils are to get an extra £39 million a year, beginning with the next financial year next April.

The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) welcomes the extra funds as anybody would welcome "water after years of drought", saying that the new budget will do little more than avert disaster. CVCP was especially indignant at the meagreness of the increase for the research councils, saying that the sum is not only disappointing but that it does not compare with the investment in research by Britain's industrial competitors.

Announcing the increases last week, Mr Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education and Science, more than hinted that there are strings attached. In particular, the university increases are dependent on continuing progress in the rationalization of research and the channelling of sufficient funds into applied research.

Baker, who succeeded Sir Keith Joseph as secretary of state only in June, said last week that he "would expect" the University Grants Committee (UGC) to provide for some early retirement and the recruitment of new young academic staff and special initiatives in teacher training to help deal with the shortage of teachers of mathematics, physics and technology in British schools.

The execution of this policy is in the hands of UGC, which began the process of selectivity last May, when universities were told individually that public support

for this academic year would for the first time be linked with research performance. The equity of that unequal distribution of funds was widely disputed (see *Nature* 322, 299; 1986); by the end of next year UGC and the research councils are to produce a joint statement of the criteria that will be followed in the further pursuit of selectivity in research.



Kenneth Baker's cash has strings attached.

Meanwhile, UGC says that whatever the funds available through the research councils, "universities separately need to draw up and carry out plans for the selective distribution of the resources they devote to research". This will lead to "better research through the concentration of effort in strong departments".

British universities are also under continuing pressure to improve their internal management along lines recommended by the Jarratt committee in 1985; responses by individual universities are now in the hands of UGC. The government is also pressing for common criteria of academic quality and the abolition of academic tenure.

UGC is responding to the further pressure to rationalize the pattern of university activity in Britain by a series of reviews of academic areas. Reviews have already been completed of teaching and research in pharmacy, agriculture, oceanography, Italian and Scandinavian studies.

There will be further pressure on the university system later this month, with the planned publication of a Cabinet Office report on publicly supported research. The government has not hidden its discontent with the efficiency with which research is transferred from universities and government research establishments to the commercial sector. **Bill Johnstone**

## Meningitis

## Puzzling cluster in rural Britain

THE incidence of meningitis in the small English parish of Stonehouse in Gloucestershire, which is 14 times the British average, has now prompted the British Department of Health to mount a special investigation. Forty doctors, nurses and scientists will shortly complete the first phase of a programme to try to determine the reason. It is hoped that the 7,000 residents of Stonehouse will agree to be tested.

The subject of the study is principally a bacterial strain of meningococcal meningitis (B15R) which is resistant to Group B Type 15 sulphonamide. In the past five years, 53 cases of meningitis, mostly B15R, have been diagnosed in the Stroud area of Gloucestershire (population 103,600), which includes Stonehouse. Since 1984, Stonehouse has recorded 10 out of 12 diagnosed cases of the disease from among the 2,000 people living on one housing estate. The national average for the incidence of meningitis is 1 per 100,000 of the population. The incidence in the Gloucester district is five times that figure, and that of Stroud is double again with 9 cases per 100,000.

The research project is being coordinated by Gloucester Public Health Laboratory and the Gloucester Health Authority with support from the Department of Health and Social Security (£57,000) and the Meningitis Trust (£20,000), a charity recently established in the Gloucester area to fight the disease.

The volunteers in the programme will submit themselves to swabs and blood and saliva tests. The results of the first two categories of data are expected to identify the carriers of the disease and those with immunities; it is hoped that the other, conducted by a team from the University of Edinburgh, will indicate the type of person susceptible to contracting it. The Edinburgh team hopes to substantiate its theory that those who do not secrete blood group substances into their saliva are more likely to develop meningitis.

Although the disease can be successfully treated with antibiotics if diagnosed early, some young victims have died within two days. Fever, rash, vomiting and eventual coma are the classic symptoms. But although the under-fives are more susceptible to the ordinary form of the disease, the B15R strain is claiming many of its victims from among young adults, most of them teenagers.

The numbers of diagnosed cases of meningitis peaked in 1974 with 1,296 cases and dropped to an all-time low ten years later with 404. But last year the figure was 549 and 900 cases are expected this year.

**Bill Johnstone**

## University Grants Committee grants (£ million, year starts 1 April)

	1986-87	1987-88	1988-89
Previous plans	1,318 (108)*	1,356 (106)	1,392 (110)
November 1986 plans	—	1,413 (110)	1,463 (110)
Increase over previous plans	—	57 (4)	71 (0)
		Total: 61	Total: 71

\* Values are for the recurrent grant, with equipment grant given in parentheses.