

British research learns how to spend extra

- New interdisciplinary centres under way
- Three-year increases in science budget

London

ONE of the most recent innovations in the British pattern of research support, the interdisciplinary research centre (IRC) is to be the subject of a major review after the British government has expressed caution about the programme. The review, which is to begin this month and be complete by the summer, will cover the selection of topics on which the centres work, their management, links with industry and their evaluation.

This development was announced with the publication last week of the annual advice from the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) to the Department of Education and Science about the allocation of the science budget for the years ahead. The occasion is especially important this year because £340 million will be added to the science budget over the next three years.

For next year, the extra money amounts to £107 million, bringing the total for 1989-90 to £825 million. Of the extra, a quarter will be absorbed by extra allocations already made to the British Geological Survey, the British Antarctic Survey, CERN (the European High-Energy Physics Laboratory), directed research on AIDS and the cost of further redundancies at the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC).

In previous years, prior allocations have absorbed most of the extra funds available, but in the coming year there will be a significant amount left over to be divided among the research councils. Overall, the 1989-90 budget for civil science is 11 per cent greater than in the present year, which ABRC says will do much to improve morale. But ABRC also says that the allocations for the succeeding 2 years imply a reduction of 3 per cent in real terms, which

it says will mean that research councils will have to cut back on the projects they support.

With the extra funds available for next year, the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) will spend £2.5 million on the first phase of an IRC in population biology at Imperial College, London, and £5.5 million on a centre for oceanography at Southampton. It will expand work on the biogeochemical ocean flux study (£2.7 million) and on the North Sea survey, meant to lead to a model for predicting water quality.

The Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), the largest of those supporting natural science research, will spend £7 million next year on founding four new IRCs, in optical and laser-related science and technology, high-performance materials, polymer science and technology and process simulation, integration and control. It will also start a new programme in materials and biotechnology with £5 million of its extra allocation. SERC also has an extra £6 million for research grants, £9 million for university equipment and £0.4 million for its Cray computer facility.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) can now go ahead with an IRC in cell biology (£2 million) at Kings and University Colleges, London, in protein engineering (£2 million) at the University of Cambridge and the MRC Laboratory for Molecular Biology. It also has an extra £2.6 million for AIDS research and £2.3 million to set up an information and resource centre for mapping the human genome together with a related programme for research.

A further £2 million will allow the council to make a start on a national centre for clinical research at the Royal Postgrad-

Ozone limitations

Paris

FRENCH industry is taking steps to limit the use of products containing chlorofluorocarbons and halons. A series of conventions signed last week by representatives of government and industry are intended to reduce by 90 per cent the use of these propellants in aerosols by 1991 — two years before the target date set by the Montreal Protocol.

Beginning in 1991, aerosol cans containing chlorofluorocarbons will have to carry a written warning declaring that their use could affect the ozone layer. Manufacturers of refrigeration and air-conditioning appliances will encourage the recovery of coolants and will take measures to prevent leakage if appliances are dumped.

From the beginning of next year, manufacturers will also attach a warning to new appliances, encouraging users to collect the coolant for recycling. This will require the redesign of cooling circuits to include a drainage reservoir, as well as establishing public facilities for recovery of used coolant.

The newly signed conventions will also limit the use of fire-extinguishers containing halons. Atochem, the only French manufacturer of chlorofluorocarbons has agreed to make alternative compounds available to users.

Peter Coles

uate School at Hammersmith. There will again be more to spend on research grants (£1.5 million), studentships (£0.2 million) and equipment (£2.9 million).

The chief new projects of AFRC are an IRC in transgenic animal biology at the University of Edinburgh (£1.5 million) and new programme of research in plant molecular biology (£3.5 million), but the council will also take the lead in the government's new programme of research on agriculture and the environment (£1.5 million). The cost of restructuring the Institute for Animal Health is £3 million.

The delay in the announcement of this year's allocation of the science budget has fuelled speculation of a dispute between the prime minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, and the Department of Education and Science. The Labour party's education and science spokesman, Mr Jack Straw, says that the prime minister is unhappy with the department's administration of the councils, and that she wishes to move ABRC from beneath its umbrella.

But others suspect her of having intervened to contain spending on the IRCs, having advocated support for individual researchers of talent working singly or in small groups. But both the department and the Prime Minister's office deny there has been a dispute. The future of ABRC is itself being reviewed by the department; a report is due in the summer.

Christine McGourty

The UK science budget agreed for 1989-90 and planning figures for 1990-91 and 1991-92

Additions	1989-90 (£ million)	1990-91 (£ million)	1991-92 (£ million)
'Earmarked additions'	27	33	33
Research council restructuring	14	12	11
Interdisciplinary research centres	16	21	14
'Directed' programmes	23	29	34
Research grants	10	13	14
Manpower	3	5	8
Equipment	12	—	—
Other	3	4	2
Total	108	117	116
Final budget	825.6	837.6	855.8