Funding, east and west

Bonn

AN unexpectedly meagre increase in the 1991 budget for the German Research and Technology Ministry (BMFT) last week deepened the malaise in which German research has found itself since unification began last year.

To make matters worse, a budget crisis in Berlin and the former East Germany is threatening to bring to a halt the ambitious plans for restructuring research in the east currently being drafted by the science council Wissenschaftsrat.

The latest developments will probably lead to greater competition for ministry research funds in the west, combined with rising resentment especially in eastern Germany over a perceived unwillingness by the west to share its limited resources.

Based on unofficial figures confirmed by the Ministry, the proposed 1991 budget for BMFT will rise by a disappointing estimated eight per cent or DM 629 million to DM 8,496 million (\$5,860 million), despite the growth in the amount of research to be supported in a larger Germany. Though the increase is well above the 1990 inflation rate of 2.7 per cent, it is disappointing compared to the projected 1991 BMFT budget for West Germany alone, set in July 1990 (and withdrawn soon afterwards) at DM 8,181 million.

The government is expected to approve an additional DM 450 million in "discontinuation funding" in 1991 for the institutes of the former East German Academy of Sciences. The eight-per-cent figure is still considered preliminary as it needs cabinet approval at a meeting on 20 February; but it is considered by BMFT to be a maximum figure that may even be cut.

The small increase is expected to bring on a period of belt-tightening in the west, with some programmes being cut and others receiving the same as last year.

Funding for individual projects is considered to be in the most danger, because BMFT is required to maintain its institutional and foreign commitments, such as salaries for workers at national laboratories and cooperative space science projects.

The crisis that threatens eastern research is of a much more direct nature. The eastern *Länder* simply do not have enough money to pay their bills, so research is not the only area that will suffer unless Bonn and the western *Länder* offer some relief. But if the west does not move soon to guarantee research funding, at least for 1991, there may be disastrous consequences for universities and other research institutions.

The heads of the five eastern *Länder* said in Bonn last week that they could finance only a small percentage of their

budgets with tax revenue. In Thuringia, the figure was just 18 per cent; in Saxony, 25 per cent. The rest will have to be made up by funds from the west. They were promised a response by 28 February, when Chancellor Helmut Kohl will meet the heads of all 16 *Länder*.

Since universities are assigned to the *Länder* by Germany's federal system, university budgets — including their research budgets — are likely to be among the first to be hit. Furthermore, *Länder* cannot set up the new institutions recommended by the Wissenschaftsrat until there is finance for them.

The *Länder* that would be hit hardest by the shortfall are Saxony and Berlin, which house several universities as well as well over half of the 70 research institutes of the former East German Academy of Sciences. The operation of universities in eastern Germany will "collapse" if help does not arrive soon, says Saxony science ministry spokesman Hartmut Häckel.

According to the Berlin science ministry, even the most modest recommendations of the science council Wissenschaftsrat cannot be followed without funds from outside (see *Nature* 349, 448; 1991). Berlin has announced a global budget reduction of 11.5 per cent for its three universities, a cut that will hurt most in research support and the hiring of student assistants. "We want a new structure for research [in Berlin]", says Jochen Stoeck, head of the research division in the ministry, "but without financial help, [the recommendations] are pure futility."

Everyone agrees that western Germans will have to carry a disproportionate share of the cost of running research institutions in the east at least for several years. Bonn and the western *Länder* could wind up providing as much as 90 per cent of the budget of newly created institutes until the eastern *Länder* are in a position to take on a larger share. The current dispute concerns exactly how much Bonn and the western *Länder* will pay.

The lack of a larger increase at BMFT will have only an indirect impact on the eastern German budget situation. Bonn and the western *Länder* will probably decide to increase some existing source of funds for the eastern *Länder*, such as the 'German unity fund' created last year to finance German unification.

The only direct casualties will probably be those institutions, like the biomedical research centre recommended by Wissenschaftsrat for Berlin-Buch, that are dependent to a large extent on outside grants. Dieter Simon, chairman of Wissenschaftsrat, says it is a "scandal" for the western *Länder* to refuse to help eastern Germany.

Steven Dickman

Another tough year for MRC

London

THE Medical Research Council (MRC), which preceded the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) last autumn in declaring a state of financial emergency (see *Nature* 348, 184; 15 November 1990), is also pruning its spending plans.

Nick Winterton, head of the MRC secretariat, says the MRC expects to spend 10–15 per cent less on new research grants this year than in 1990–91, which should save up to £2 million. MRC research units will also have to make savings: Winterton says their budgets will grow by only 2.5 per cent in the coming year, well below the rate of inflation, currently near ten per cent.

Like SERC, the MRC is threatening closures if the government fails to increase the science budget in 1992–93. The work of each MRC research unit is reviewed every five years, and some ten units will face review over the next 12 months. "Unless we get additional money", Winterton says, "we will have to consider further unit closures."

Peter Aldhous

CANCER THERAPY

Neutron-treatment fund axed

London

THE British government has decided not to provide £6 million towards the development of a controversial cancer therapy centre in London. The scheme, to install a cyclotron at St Thomas's Hospital to generate neutrons for use in treating cancer, had had the personal backing of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It was opposed on two grounds: first, that funds were to have come directly from the Treasury rather than through the Department of Health, and, second, that there seemed no clear evidence that neutron irradiation was any more successful than other kinds of radiotherapy.

A Medical Research Council trial of neutron irradiation to treat pelvic cancers at the Clatterbridge Hospital near Liverpool was halted last year because of high mortality among the patients, after which the grant to St Thomas's was put under review.

Then, on 1 December 1990, the *British Medical Journal* published results of a long-term follow-up study of patients with cancers of the head and neck, treated at the Western General Hospital in Edinburgh, which showed that patients who had been treated with neutrons were likely to die sooner than other patients. Research at Clatterbridge on head and neck cancers, however, is still continuing.

Henry Gee