

Dutch reforms raise alarm in universities

[MUNICH] The Dutch government plans to increase central control over research spending by transferring Df1500 million (US\$250 million) of university funds to the national research council, the NWO. The rules of the council — at present an independent agency — will be changed to allow the government to decide how the new money is to be spent.

The transfer would double the current NWO budget, and reduce that of the universities by 20 per cent. At the same time, the government wants to separate the administration of the NWO's 14 research institutes from its grant-giving activities, to avoid potential conflict of interest.

The plans, announced in September by Jo Ritzen, Minister of Education, Culture and Science, have been generally welcomed by the NWO. But they have been greeted with alarm by the universities, unwilling to lose control of the distribution of research funds.

Some of the NWO's discipline-orientated advisory groups, known as 'foundations', which recommend how grant money should be distributed, have also argued strongly against creating a new organizational structure for NWO research institutes, many of which are closely integrated into universities.

"It would isolate institutes from universities," says Huup Eggens, head of the natural



Ritzen: mixed reaction to research proposals.

sciences foundation (FOM), which represents the high-energy physics community. Others express concern about the vagueness of Ritzen's plan to split the functions of the NWO. But they are optimistic that it could bring improvements. "The transition period has not been thought through in detail," says Harvey Butcher, head of the Netherlands Foundation for Research in Astronomy and director of the NWO's institute for astronomy in Dwingeloo. "But there is room for improvement in the way our institutes are run, provided changes are carried out in a professional way."

Dutch natural scientists also complain that the announcement of Ritzen's plans has accelerated the NWO's continuing internal restructuring process, which is intended to simplify its decision-making. The number of foundations has been cut from 34 to 20 over the past four years, but the NWO plans to eliminate this whole level of decision-making, and transfer its activities to the area councils which are responsible for much broader

disciplines. Eggens says, however, that taking away control from the experts "will have a deleterious effect on the quality of research".

Predictably, universities are upset at the prospect of losing control over a substantial proportion of their budgets. A spokesman for the Association of Universities, Jan-Willem Vos, says that such a drastic change could force redundancies among university staff. Vos says the universities feel cheated because they agreed only six months ago that the NWO would distribute Df1200 million from the universities' budget to the ten university research groups judged, through open competition, to be working in research areas designated as strategic priorities by the NWO.

But Ritzen says that the transfer would be carried out over a few years, to avoid disruption within universities. He says his plan would increase competition between universities and allow the government to have a role in setting research priorities based on industrial and social needs that is more in line with its European Union neighbours.

Hein Meijers, a spokesman for the NWO, says the organization is happy for the government to help define priority research areas — provided that the proportion of its funds used for strategic research does not exceed 50 per cent.

Alison Abbott

South Africa increases central control of higher education

[CAPE TOWN] South Africa's parliament last week approved a major reform of the country's higher education system, despite concern about language policy and centralized control.

The bill's most important consequence will be the creation of a Council on Higher Education to accredit degree programmes, allocate funds to universities and technikons (advanced technical colleges) on a three-year cycle, and audit quality assurance. The council will also advise on the intractable problem of student financial aid.

The Council on Higher Education will comprise 14 voting and 6 non-voting members, but its real power is vested in a five-person executive committee that can act on the council's behalf. Although the full council can revoke the executive committee's decisions, action taken as a result of an executive committee decision before its revocation will remain valid.

The government hopes to appoint the members of the council by the end of the year. The first six months of next year are likely to be spent allocating places for programmes to institutions, and deciding the financial value of subsidies for different degree programmes.

This process is likely to be controversial if

the council pursues the government's stated aim of redressing the present huge bias in favour of subsidized places in arts and social science — as opposed to natural-science-based disciplines — as this bias is most prevalent in the former black universities. But the process should be helped by the government's decision to provide additional earmarked funds to correct past imbalances.

Earmarked funds for research are provided for in the subsidy formula of the higher education white paper's final version — unlike an earlier version (see *Nature* 387, 327; 1997) — which was officially published in April. This provision allows the minister to allocate funds for preserving and strengthening areas of research excellence, as well as for developing new ones.

Specifically, the white paper emphasizes that enrolment levels in doctoral programmes are not only too low but are also biased in terms of race and gender. The new system is intended to support postgraduates in fields where institutions have demonstrable research training capacity. Provision is also made for institutions to apply for earmarked funds to enhance the infrastructure necessary to support expanded postgraduate training.

The right-wing Freedom Front was one of

the parties opposing the bill — the party is concerned about the future of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in universities. Freedom Front students in the public gallery disrupted the bill's debate in parliament.

They were protesting against a provision allowing the education minister to decide the language policy of tertiary institutions on the advice of the Council on Higher Education.

The National Party and the Democratic Party also voted against the bill, the latter on the grounds that it gives the government increased control over higher education institutions.

Walter Claassen, vice-rector for academic affairs at the Afrikaans-medium University of Stellenbosch, says this centralization of power is "very worrying". While acknowledging the government's desire to change the system in accordance with national goals, he feels that "this should not be done in such a way that the autonomy of universities is threatened".

But Claassen describes the decision to allow the new higher education council to allocate funds to universities and technikons on a three-year cycle as a "very promising development, as it could provide a more secure basis for institutions in planning enrolments".

Michael Cherry