

# British research council seeks to cut role of collective peer review

**London.** A radical change in the way that research grant applications are evaluated for funding, eliminating the role of peer review committees and increasing the discretionary powers of programme managers, is being proposed for Britain's new Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC).

The move is part of a government-inspired strategy both to streamline the operation of the research councils, and to increase the weight given in funding decisions to the perception of a research project's potential contribution to wealth creation.

At present, all grant applications submitted to the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) are assessed by the members of one of the SERC's specialist review committees. The committee members collectively assign a score to each application, and those receiving the highest scores are put forward for funding.

A radical change is now being proposed for the EPSRC, which will take over a large proportion of the responsibilities of the SERC from the beginning of next month, in line with the recommendations of last year's white paper on science. (Most of the SERC's

remaining activities will be taken on by the new Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council.)

The proposed changes, which have been drawn up by SERC officials, will be put to the new council next month. These suggest that the review committees should be abolished, and that future applications for research grants will be assessed by programme managers, drawing on advice from outside referees.

"Peer review in the way that the SERC used to run it is being changed," a spokesman for the council said on Monday. "We are moving to a managed system, where peer reviewers will still be used as advisers, but will not have the delegated executive authority [to make judgements on applications] that they have at present."

The changes are part of a general shake-up of the way that research councils operate which is being demanded by the Office of Science and Technology, and steered through by John Cadogan, the new director-general of research councils.

Last month, for example, William Waldegrave, the cabinet minister responsible for science, announced that half of an

extra £15 million which is to be spent on new research programmes designed to further the white paper's objectives is to be found from efficiency savings within the research councils.

The prospect of cutting down on the bureaucracy which currently accompanies the grant review process is likely to be welcomed in the scientific community, many of whose members complain of the amount of time and paperwork they have to spend on current procedures for assessing applications.

At the same time, however, there is concern that the new procedures could undermine the traditional peer review process, and reduce the weight given to scientific quality in comparison to other criteria for assessing research proposals — in particular their explicit industrial relevance.

"Many academic scientists will be unhappy with this change," one SERC committee member said last week. "Despite the amount of work involved, we like the existing system because we feel it does a reasonable job, and doubt whether a different way of doing things will be an improvement."

Some of the supporters of the change point out that giving greater responsibilities to programme managers will bring the EPSRC's system for allocating grants closer to that of other countries, for example the US National Science Foundation (NSF).

But its critics point to the significant difference that, in the United States, most scientists are faced with a range of potential sources of federal support. In contrast, the SERC is the sole source of public funding (apart from that provided through the university funding councils) for university scientists in many fields.

In addition, NSF programme managers tend to be academic scientists working on secondment to the agency. In contrast, the programme managers which the SERC is proposing should now be responsible for handling grant applications will be permanent SERC employees.

"For such a system to work, the programme managers must be individuals who can command respect in the scientific community," says John Mulvey, secretary of the pressure group Save British Science.

SERC officials insist that the new procedures are an integral part of the 'culture change' that will be involved in the council's transformation into its new form, emphasizing the priorities outlined in the white paper and the council's responsibility to meet its new 'missions' of improving wealth creation and the quality of life.

But the proposed changes seem ►

## Deep-sea probe draws up a blank screen

**Tokyo.** Japan's new unmanned deep-sea probe *Kaiko* has run into more bad luck. Last week, *Kaiko* set out to break the world depth record in the Challenger Deep off Guam. But after it had travelled down to about 10,900 metres, the television pictures it had been transmitting suddenly went blank 2 metres short of the sea floor, and the probe had to be hauled back to its mother ship, *Yokosuka*.

*Kaiko* will have to return to Japan for repairs, and a second attempt at breaking the 34-year-old record of 10,912 metres set by the Bathyscaphe *Trieste* in Challenger Deep in 1960 will have to wait until at least December. Last August, the hull of *Kaiko* was badly damaged during trials when it slammed into the side of the *Yokosuka* as it was being lowered into rough seas. The test in the Challenger Deep had to be delayed about seven months as a result of this accident.

The precise reason for last week's failure is unknown, but is believed to have been caused by a fault in the data transmission cable between the probe and the *Yokosuka*. The *Kaiko* has a manipulator arm that can be remotely operated to pick up samples spotted by the television cameras, and will therefore be able to perform

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REASONS

**Kaiko being prepared for dive.**

some of the functions of a manned submersible, but at much greater depth. So far, ¥5,400 million (\$52 million) has been invested in its development by the Japan Marine Science and Technology Centre. □

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