and presented to council members at their first full meeting two weeks ago set out a strategy for addressing both issues by replacing the traditional system of peer-review committees with the new system.

Now, decisions on grant awards will be the responsibility of programme managers. Decisions will still be based on advice from scientific peer-review committees; but programme managers will also be expected to take into account input from other sources about how the research in question will meet the EPSRC's explicit mission.

The approach was agreed upon in principle by the council, although formal approval is being withheld until the council has been told how the new system will operate in practice — and, in particular, how the balance will in practice be struck between scientific and other criteria.

Officials of both the EPSRC and the OST have been taking pains to stress that the new system is not intended to replace the traditional peer-review system. William Waldegrave, the cabinet minister responsible for science, has said in a letter to the opposition science spokesman, Lewis Moonie, that peer review will remain a "key element" in determining the quality of basic science research proposals.

But Waldegrave also emphasized that grant applications will not be judged on scientific merit alone, and that attention will also be paid to the extent to which the research proposed is aligned with technological priorities identified, for example, by the Technology Foresight programme.

"The way that the SERC handled grant requests had certainly become very bureaucratic and time-consuming, with far too much micro-management by committees," says John Mulvey of the University of Oxford. "But if a lot of real responsibility is delegated to civil servants in the Swindon office [of the EPSRC], then many scientists will be watching this with caution."

EPSRC officials say that the new responsibilities of programme managers will be little different from those occupying similar positions in the US National Science Foundation (NSF). But British scientists point to the important difference that the US officials are frequently university scientists on secondment to the NSF, whereas their British counterparts are full-time civil servants.

Meanwhile, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has published draft proposals of criteria it suggests using to allocate money to university departments to support "generic research" of potential interest to industry.

University departments will qualify for such extra funds, the HEFCE proposes, provided that they already receive research support of at least £20,000 a year from at least three different outside bodies.

The HEFCE has already decided that £10 million should be awarded to university departments for generic research in the next academic year. □

Scotland digs in over mooted shake-up of research labs

Edinburgh. Centuries of ill-feeling between England and Scotland have resurfaced over a proposal by a group of civil servants that a number of Scottish research institutes be grouped together into new agencies "owned" either by the London-based Ministry of Agriculture Food and Fisheries (MAFF), or the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC).

The proposal is contained in the "emerging findings" of a review of government research laboratories being carried out by the Cabinet Office's Efficiency Unit currently circulating in Whitehall. It is one of several proposals designed to rationalize the organization of these laboratories by grouping them according to common interests (see *Nature* 368, 681; 1994).

The preliminary conclusion of the group, for example, is that all government research institutes in the United Kingdom relating to the marine environment might be placed in a single grouping "owned" by the Scottish Office, while those relating to food production be reorganized under MAFF, and more basic biological research to the BBSRC.

But some Scottish scientists are worried that, if accepted by the government, such proposals could undermine what is described as the "Scottish system" of research support. This is based on encouraging strong vertical links between institutes involved in basic and applied research, as well as horizontal links between those involved in different areas of science.

Others fear that, although the amalgamation proposed in the preliminary conclusions might lead to a more cost-effective use of research resources for Britain as a whole, it could result in funds being taken away from smaller Scottish institutes as resources are concentrated on larger institutions south of the border.

"The problem is that, looked at on a UK basis, Scottish institutions that play a useful role locally can be totally outweighed by bodies in the south", says Maxwell Irvine, principal of the University of Aberdeen, which is currently involved in a scheme linking several local institutions — such as the internationally known Rowett Research Institute and Macaulay Land Use Research Institute — into a joint research consortium.

"We would be very concerned if those who are playing national games [with the reorganization of research institutes] were to weaken what we see as a very positive regional development."

The dispute has also highlighted an apparent difference in research strategies between the Scottish Office, which is keen to

play an active part in stimulating collaborative efforts by the private and public sectors, and the Cabinet Office in London, which is placing greater emphasis on reducing direct

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Last year, the Scottish Office's Agricultural and Fisheries Department published a policy statement suggesting an expansion of the Scottish system under a Scottish Biological Sciences Board.

Some fear that, if implemented, the scrutiny team's proposals could introduce new vertical and horizontal distinctions between institutes that would cut directly across the Scottish Office's attempts to build an integrated system of research support.

Jean Balfour, a former chairwoman of the Scottish Countryside Commission, warns that such a move would be "extremely destructive to the whole question of how research is carried out in Scotland".

At the same time, the dispute has fanned a more widespread disenchantment in Scotland with some of the policies of the Conservative government, particularly since cuts in public spending have frequently hit those areas in which Scotland has benefited substantially from its membership of the United Kingdom in the past.

At a meeting in Edinburgh last month organized by the Royal Society of Edinburgh as part of the Edinburgh Science Festival, for example, Bruce Pattullo, the governor and chief executive officer of the Bank of Scotland, warned that privatization — one of the government's main policy objectives — "is about maximizing short term cash returns to the Treasury, and not about maximizing competition".

William Waldegrave, the cabinet minister responsible for science, has promised that the final version of the scrutiny team's report will be made available for public comment before any of its recommendations are acted on by the government. Several Scottish research institutes are said to be sharpening their pens in readiness.

David Dickson

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