

'Role models not important in helping women choose science'

London. Coinciding with the British government's decision to set up a 'development unit' to encourage more women to pursue careers in science, a survey of women scientists has shown that, contrary to popular belief, female role models are not a significant factor influencing such a decision.

The survey, carried out by the unit of policy research in science and medicine of the Wellcome Trust in London, is believed to be one of the first to back up anecdotal explanations on the paucity of women in science with hard data. Its conclusions are based on replies to questionnaires sent to 130 male and female undergraduates and postgraduates in physics and biochemistry at the Universities of Leeds and Cambridge.

Two-thirds of the women scientists questioned felt they did not need a role model to keep them in science, although most saw scientific research as a male-dominated area. The replies also revealed that, although 70 per cent of the women had decided between the ages of 11 and 16 to study science, a stimulating or challenging first degree course was a major factor in reinforcing such a decision.

The study's recommendations for making science more attractive to women coincide closely with those made by the Committee on Women in Science, Engineering and Technology in *The Rising Tide*, a report drawn up for the Office of Science and Technology (OST), and published earlier this year.

Specific proposals include the introduction of flexible working hours, with part-time work, job sharing and career breaks; help with the cost of child-care; schemes to help women taking 'career breaks' to keep

in touch; and the inclusion of more refresher training for those returning to work after a long break.

In an official government response to the committee's report, William Waldegrave, the minister of public service and science, told the House of Commons last week that the government would adopt the committee's main recommendation: it will set up a 'development unit' under the auspices of the OST, with two full-time members of staff, to oversee the promotion of women in science, engineering and technology.

The unit will initially run for two years, and will collaborate with other bodies to establish "women-friendly management practices" which it will encourage other public and private sector employers to adopt.

The unit will work with the Department of Employment to improve careers advice for women, and encourage employers to establish databases of women in science, engineering and technology. It will try to raise the profile of women scientists and their contribution in the media.

Jean Balfour, deputy chairman of the committee headed by Sir William Stewart, the government's chief scientific adviser, described the allocation of two members of staff as "significant" in the current economic climate. She also welcomed the setting up of the development unit as "a mechanism to move things forward".

But Balfour said the committee would be "disappointed" that recommendations on tax relief for child-care had been rejected. The government turned down this proposal because it is not prepared to make women scientists a special case. **Maggie Verrall**

Slovak minister lifts block on extra money for science

Bratislava. Slovakia's new government, formed after the fall of its predecessor in March, has agreed to top up research funds for this year with an additional SK110 million (around US\$3.5 million).

This sum had been promised by the last government, but only on condition that a new bill conferring legal status on Slovakia's



Harach: committed to boost science.

two grant-making agencies — one for basic research and one for applied research — was passed first (see *Nature* 368, 386; 1994). But Lubomír Harach, the new minister for education and science and former director of the ministry's Institute of Information and Forecasting, has decided that this condition is no longer necessary.

Last month, Harach announced that nearly two-thirds of the money would go to applied research and just over a quarter to basic research. The remaining funds would be used to match money received for international collaborative projects.

Not everyone is happy. The Slovak Academy of Science argues that the Agency for Science should have a larger share of the money, as it has introduced a proper peer-review system for evaluating research proposals, in contrast to the Agency of Technology.

But Harach says that his allocation of the money is in line with the priorities he hopes to establish in Slovakia. He also says that he wants the government to address the need for a coherent long-term science policy.

Previous recommendations in this direction from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development have been ignored by successive post-communist governments on the grounds that it should await development of a proper economic policy.

But Harach is already planning to put together an analysis of the current state of Slovakian research, and to compile a list of national scientific priorities. "This government gives great support to science and technology," he says.

Harach also plans to propose a separate ministry or state committee for higher education, science and technology, in order to give research a higher political profile and ensure that it is better coordinated. How much he will be able to achieve before the general election in September remains to be seen.

Alison Abbott

CNRS committee 'to break silence' on ethics

Paris. Europe's largest basic-research organization, the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), has launched an initiative to identify ethical problems raised by research in disciplines other than biology and medicine.

The new ethics committee, known as COMET, is the brainchild of François Kourilsky, the outgoing director-general of CNRS. Kourilsky has long argued that researchers must take account of the social acceptability of their work if they are to avoid a public backlash against it.

The development of nuclear technology, research on behaviour and the environment and the manipulation of historical research to political ends will all fall under the remit of the new committee, which will both produce expert opinions on topics submitted to it and take its own

initiatives. Another area to be reviewed will be problems associated with the dissemination of scientific results, and professional integrity.

The president of COMET is Héléne Ahrweiler, a historian, former director of the Academy of Paris, and president of the University of Europe. She is determined that the committee will be more than a talking shop. Its main goal will be "to disturb, to break the silence", by asking "the right questions".

"Silence is the biggest enemy", Ahrweiler has said, claiming that the idea of "consensus" was invented so that "imbeciles wouldn't feel alone". Many important questions are never asked, she has said, claiming that the consequent vacuum is often exploited by "mafias and scientific pressure groups". Declan Butler