

Britain backs off compulsory year prior to PhD work

London. The British government formally announced last week the introduction of a new one-year Master's qualification, to be known as the MRes, intended to prepare graduates before embarking on a three-year PhD. But, to the relief of many in the scientific community, it said that the new qualification will not be a pre-requisite for PhD students supported by the research councils.

The Office of Science and Technology (OST) is inviting the research councils to run a series of pilot courses from autumn 1995. Their aim will be to provide potential PhD students with an introduction to research techniques — and to introduce a new qualification that will be of value to employers in its own right for those who decide not to pursue a PhD.

But, in announcing the government's decision, David Hunt, the minister for science, said that there would be "no requirement" for students to complete a Master's year before embarking on a three-year PhD. This is a significant change from the position of the government in last year's white paper, *Realising Our Potential*, which stated that taking a Master's degree would be the "normal pattern" for most PhD students.

At the time, the proposals received a mixed welcome from industry and academic institutions. Among concerns raised were that, without an increase in funding, a switch from three- to four-year postgraduate studies would inevitably lead to a significant

reduction in the number of PhDs produced by British universities.

Some of these concerns were addressed in a consultation document on the proposals published by the OST in February this year (see *Nature* 367, 674; 1994). This proposed that the MRes could be awarded to those completing the first year of a four-year PhD programme that would incorporate the aspects of the MRes in the first year of study.

Paul Leonard, executive for science and technology of the Chemical Industries Association, which had argued strongly against a compulsory one-year pre-PhD course, says that the turnaround should not be seen as a sign of weakness on the part of the government. "Changing one's mind means taking advice and acting accordingly," he says.

The government's decision was also welcomed by the Royal Society, which had expressed reservations about the initial proposals — and had suggested that a pilot scheme would be a good way of testing their viability. But the society is not totally convinced that the threat to PhD numbers has been lifted.

Joe Vinen, professor of physics at the University of Birmingham and chairman of a committee set up by the Royal Society to report on the proposed MRes, said he was pleased to see the government had incorporated flexibility. But, he added, "we would continue to be concerned about numbers of PhDs."

Maggie Verrall

Meeting celebrates 125th birthday

Paris. French President François Mitterrand last week expressed his support for a collaboration between *Nature* and the Collège de France in Paris to launch jointly an annual event on a topic of contemporary scientific interest.

His message was addressed to a colloquium held in Paris last week-end and jointly organized by the two bodies as the first of a series of events being mounted to celebrate *Nature's* 125th anniversary.

The colloquium provided an opportunity for several of the college's most distinguished scientists to reflect in public on the principal events in their academic careers. The biologist François Jacob, for example, spoke of the events that had led him to collaborate with fellow countryman Jacques Monod, and to later collaboration with US and British colleagues.

Physicist Anatole Abragam described his discovery of the English word "serendipity" as a description of some of his experiences with nuclear-magnetic resonance during a two-year stay at the University of Oxford in

the 1940s. Similarly Christian de Duve pointed out how many of his discoveries in the field of cell biology would not have taken place if those providing him with financial support had insisted that he focused solely on the mechanism of insulin, the topic for which he was being funded.

Etienne Baulieu drew on his experiences with the controversies surrounding his 'abortion pill' RU486 to make a plea for scientists to become more involved in public debates on the impacts of their discoveries. Palaeoanthropologist Yves Coppens described how his predecessors had refused to accept Neanderthal man as an ancestor "because he was so ugly".

Astrophysicist Jean-Claude Pecker, after describing the various pleasures he had experienced sky-watching from observatories around the world, made a plea for greater support for scientists wishing to publish in languages other than English. Other speakers were Jean Dausset, founder of the Centre des Etudes du Polymorphisme Humaine (CEPH), and the biophysicist Pierre Joliot. □

New EC appointees 'will seek to bind research to industry'

Paris. The joint research programmes of the European Union (EU) are likely to place greater emphasis on focused industrial and social goals following the confirmation last weekend that Edith Cresson, the former French socialist prime minister, will succeed Antonio Ruberti as the EU's research commissioner when he steps down at the end of the year (see *Nature* 371, 728; 1994).

As prime minister, Cresson was a strong advocate of an interventionist industrial policy. This has led to speculation that her appointment will lead to closer links between the directorate for research and development (DGXIII) and the directorates for industry (DGIII) and information technology (DGIII) (see *Nature* 371, 190; 1994).

Cresson has not, as some had expected, taken direct control of several of DGIII's current functions, such as competitiveness. She has only obtained direct control of the SPRINT and VALUE innovation and technology transfer programmes, which are currently run by DGXIII.

But at a meeting earlier this week, Cresson and Martin Bangemann — the German commissioner who will retain responsibility for both industry and information technology in the new commission — agreed to "take all useful and appropriate initiatives to launch common projects of industrial interest".

The fourth Framework programme, for 1994–98, has a budget of Ecu12.3 billion (US\$14.9 billion). One commission official says that Cresson will probably have a "margin of manoeuvre" to give the programme an "industrial flavour", using Ecu700 million held in reserve for the next Framework, and Ecu1 billion of anticipated contributions from the four countries (Austria, Finland, Sweden and Norway) which are expected to join the EU.

Commission officials say that Cresson's role will be reinforced by the expected appointment of François Lamouroux as her senior official. Lamouroux was deputy head of Cresson's office during her spell as prime minister, and is now a powerful official in the industry directorate. "He is a hard man, and a tough negotiator", says one official.

Another appointment announced last weekend which is likely to have a significant impact on areas of research such as biotechnology is that of Ritt Bjerregaard, a socialist member of the Danish parliament, as commissioner for the environment (DGXI). The appointment has already been welcomed by environmentalist groups. "We are glad to have a Dane," says Linda Bullard, from the green group at the European Parliament. "They are more environmentally friendly than other member states."

Declan Butler