

Postgraduate funding should 'depend on research quality'

London. Only the most scientifically productive university departments should receive funds for postgraduate research from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), according to a review of postgraduate education in the United Kingdom published last week.

Such a strategy is necessary to ensure that leading universities maintain the standard of their research and continue to compete internationally, says the review panel, which was chaired by Martin Harris, vice-chancellor of the University of Manchester.

But many universities have reacted with concern to the panel's suggestion that available funds should go only to departments scoring Grade 3 or better (on an ascending scale of one to five) in the funding council's regular 'research assessment exercise'.

The Harris committee was set up to reconcile the increasing number of postgraduate students in the United Kingdom — now 21 per cent of the total student population, up from only 13 per cent in 1979 — with the limited funds now available.

The group was jointly commissioned to carry out the report by the HEFCE, the Standing Committee for Principals, and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals. Its recommendations will be presented to the HEFCE board later this month, and also to the government's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing.

According to Harris, the committee

decided not to recommend limiting student numbers to make do with currently available funds — as was done with the undergraduate sector — on the grounds that this would have restricted postgraduate courses. But the report also opposes the present practice of using resources from the 'already inadequate' undergraduate funding to accommodate the growth in the postgraduate sector.

In general, it endorses a market-led system for planning postgraduate education, leaving institutions free to expand provision beyond funded numbers either by charging additional fees or by making efficiency savings. Institutions would have to charge their students the real cost of courses.

The review group admits that a market-based system could mean that only the more fashionable areas of research might attract adequate numbers of postgraduate students, and that interdisciplinary study could suffer as a result. To compensate for this, it urges the research councils and the British Academy to ensure that proper attention is paid to all areas of research.

The group also recommends a code of practice for institutions to ensure that they offer appropriate facilities and supervisory arrangements for postgraduate student research. To clear up confusion about the definition of courses, it suggests a nationally applied set of criteria. Accurate descriptions of courses could eventually become a condition of government funding. **Anju Sharma**

Japan needs centre of excellence for brain research, council says

Tokyo. A proposal to set up a centre of excellence in brain research has been endorsed by the general assembly of the Science Council of Japan (JSC), a government advisory body attached to the Prime Minister's Office. A joint-use research facility and information centre, increased funding and greater cooperation between funding agencies are also recommended for the discipline.

The JSC is an elected body of scientists that advises the government on matters related to science and technology. The organization's head, Masao Ito, is one of Japan's leading brain scientists.

The proposals have been put forward in a report drawn up by a special committee on brain research and the mind. The report points out that although four different Japanese government ministries and agencies spend about ¥6 billion yen (US\$56 million) a year on brain research, this is an order of magnitude less than the funding US brain researchers receive from the National Institutes of Health alone.

The report says that funding should therefore be increased and distributed more efficiently by encouraging closer cooperation between funding agencies. According to Miwatani Toshio, a professor at Okayama Prefectural University and a member of the JSC Special Committee, the present system, with no central body to coordinate funding, leads to an overlap in research activities.

The proposed centre of excellence should be established at one of Japan's existing brain research laboratories, says the report. It would form the hub of a research network linking not only researchers in the physical sciences but also social scientists and others able to improve the understanding of the human mind.

Most ambitiously, the committee also suggests that a new cooperative-use research and information centre be set up to provide researchers in the field with advanced equipment and other facilities that individual institutions cannot afford. But Miwatani admits that funding restrictions mean that this recommendation will be difficult to implement.

Michio Oishi, director of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry's Institute for Bioscience and Human Technology, says that the government is under no obligation to take the council's advice. But he also points out that last year's science and technology basic law (see *Nature* 378, 227; 1995) has strengthened the scientific community's hand in its dealings with the Ministry of Finance, thus improving the prospects that the JSC's recommendations will be implemented. **Stephen Barker**

Bidding heats up for protein database

Paris. Prospects brightened this week for the rescue of the important SWISS-PROT protein database, threatened with closure next month following a decision by the Swiss government to stop funding for the database. Both the Swiss authorities and the European Commission are reported to be seeking solutions to the situation, after Amos Bairoch, the database's founder, received more than 1,000 letters of support from researchers worldwide. Switzerland has suddenly discovered that "after watches and chocolates, it is best known abroad for SWISS-PROT", says Bairoch.

Meanwhile, the US biotechnology company Incyte has offered to buy the database. But SWISS-PROT is considering this as a "last resort", and would prefer the database to remain in the public domain. A sale would also be likely to lead to legal conflict between SWISS-PROT and the European Bioinformatics Institute in Cambridge, England, which is

a major partner in the database and has a policy of making data freely available.

The publishing company, Reed-Elsevier — which has extensive database activities — is also reported to have put in a bid for the database. SWISS-PROT says this would be more acceptable than selling to a drug company, but would be unpopular with users, as Reed-Elsevier would inevitably charge for access. Many drug companies are also loathe to see the database fall into any one company's hands, and around thirty of them — including Glaxo-Wellcome, Hoffmann-La Roche, SmithKline Beecham, and Millennium — are said to have offered donations to keep the database afloat.

The same companies are also said to have offered to set up a consortium to fund the database. Bairoch says that even if public funds become available, ensuring the database's long-term survival may require charging commercial users for the first time. **Declan Butler**