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University tightens oversight of sensitive research

University administrators are looking to sharpen their monitoring of export violations, officials said last week at a meeting of the National Council of University Research Administrators in Washington DC.

The move comes in the wake of the first US conviction, last year, of a university professor for trafficking military-sensitive information. In July, John Reece Roth, formerly an engineer at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, was sentenced to four years in prison for breaching the Arms Export Control Act; he remains free pending an appeal. Roth had shared sensitive information relating to a plasma-guidance system for unmanned aircraft with a graduate student from Iran and another from China. The case has triggered anxiety among many academics, who fear that they could be punished for unintentional slips (see *Nature* 461, 156; 2009).

"Now that the faculty members know the facts of the Roth case, they don't want to be individually challenged; they want the support of the university," says David Brady, director of export and secure research compliance at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg.

Roth's project "slipped through the cracks" of the university's monitoring system, says Robin Witherspoon, export-control officer for the University of Tennessee's office of compliance. Witherspoon says that the university now has electronic flagging systems in place to alert her office to suspicious financial- or travel-related dealings with other countries, as well as any potentially problematic grant proposals or contracts. Witherspoon has also instigated training programmes to educate researchers

about export control of sensitive data or technology.

Christopher Golomb, a special agent with the FBI counterintelligence division in Washington DC, says that in light of the Roth conviction, the bureau is also adjusting the ways that it interacts with academic institutions. Last year, the agency conducted a survey with the Federation of American Scientists to assess negative views of law enforcement held by some in the scientific community. The

FBI is also engaged in two academic alliances with university and college presidents. "It's a great lesson learned," says Golomb. "It helps us develop policies and procedures so that professors know that they can be targeted."

The White House has ordered a review of current US export control regulations. ■
Elie Dolgin

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