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NEWS

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SCIENCE AND PUBLIC EXPENDITURE
ADVICE TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION AND SCIENCE FROM
THE ADVISORY BOARD FOR THE RESEARCH COUNCILS

Advice on the implications for civil science of the Government's spending plans, prepared by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) has been presented to the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Sir Keith Joseph, who published it today.

In their report the ABRC argues the case for a bigger share of public spending being devoted to civil science in the three financial years 1986-87, 1987-88 and 1988-89. The Board recommends an increase in the planned Science Budget of £15m in 1986-87 rising to £40m in 1988-89.

The Board says that, although the Science Budget has grown in real terms by six per cent since 1981-82 and despite the additional money which Sir Keith Joseph found for science at the end of last year, the Budget is actually buying less science than it did.

This is because certain overheads, such as superannuation and foreign exchange costs, have grown significantly faster than general inflation. In addition the cost of science itself is also growing faster than inflation, because the equipment and materials available are becoming more sophisticated.

The Board estimates that the value of the Science Budget in terms of the amount of science it can support has fallen by five per cent since 1981-82 and may fall by a further four per cent by the end of the decade, making a total reduction during the 1980s of approaching 10 per cent.

* "Science and Public Expenditure", advice by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils to the Secretary of State for Education and Science, available free on request from Room 5/61, Department of Education and Science, Elizabeth House, York Road, London SE1 7PH.

In a letter accompanying the report to Sir Keith, the Chairman of the Board, Professor Sir David Phillips, challenges the argument that a 10 per cent reduction over 10 years should be manageable while protecting top priority work.

"The UK must be more selective than hitherto about the fields of science in which it seeks to keep up with international competition. But it is unrealistic to think that we can withdraw altogether from other areas: we need people trained in research across a broad front if we are to be in a position to build on advances made in other countries."

Sir David points out that "It is the growth points of science and technology which typically attract some of our brightest minds". We need to offer brilliant young researchers opportunities in these new areas otherwise more of them will go abroad.

Thirdly, Sir David says: "Our major industrial competitors are increasing their investment in research particularly in strategic areas of importance to industry. We cannot keep up with our competitors if we rely on redeployment (which takes time) to release the necessary resources to pursue new opportunities".

The Board's report describes the efforts which the Research Councils are making to review their priorities and reduce programmes and manpower.

"By 1987-88, the number of staff directly employed by the Councils will have fallen by over 2,000 (about 20%) since 1981-82." However a substantial part of Councils' expenditure is tied up in long-term commitments, says the report.

"Although Councils are seeking to reduce their commitments the rate at which they can do this without incurring substantial redundancy costs is not fast enough to avoid the need for many economies which are essentially short-term cost-cutting expedients."

Some existing programmes and facilities are seriously underfunded and new areas of research cannot be properly developed, says the report:

- in 1984-85 the Councils were unable to fund about one third of alpha-rated research proposals from higher education;

- large new facilities with the Science and Engineering Research Council cannot be exploited fully because the Council cannot afford the necessary instrumentation;
- the Natural Environment Research Council does not have the resources to fund full UK participation in the Ocean Drilling Programme, of fundamental importance to advances in knowledge of plate tectonics and mineralisation;
- the Laboratory of Molecular Biology, a world leader in its field, can only be given about half the funds it needs to buy top priority latest equipment.

The Councils' total bids for extra funding amounted to £40m in 1986-87 rising to £70m in 1988-89. The ABRC reduced these figures to £15m and £40m respectively - a 2.5% rise in the overall budget next year rising to one of 6.5% in 1988-89.

University Research

The ABRC supports a separate bid for an additional £45m over the next 3 financial years which has been made by the University Grants Committee to help strengthen the science base in the universities.

Most of this would go towards removing and replacing obsolete equipment and to enhance the UGC's capacity to provide selective support for high quality research teams. The report says that UGC-funded research has probably been reduced in the last few years by more than that supported by the Research Councils.

"In some universities the well found laboratory no longer exists; and throughout the university system it has become very difficult indeed for even the most outstanding young research scientists to secure research appointments.

"We applaud the steps which the UGC is now taking to introduce more selectivity into the allocation of its research funds to the universities. However the UGC will not be able to maintain momentum in its selectivity exercise if it is too constrained by financial pressures. It is idle to suppose that centres of excellence can be built up without adequate funds for equipment and facilities."

The Economic Case

"We believe that Parliament, the Government and the country as a whole are complacent about the current financial straits of the dual support system.

"It is widely believed that the Research Councils are primarily concerned with supporting pure research which is pursued solely for its own sake. It is also widely believed that pure research is typically research where the chances of discoveries of relevance to the "real" world are remote. Both of these beliefs are false.

"The view that basic research is in some way dispensable rests on a misunderstanding about the general significance of basic work. On the contrary our future economic prosperity depends critically on investing adequately and effectively in the research which will produce technologies to be the basis of new industries", concludes the report.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The Advisory Board for the Research Councils, established in 1972, advises the Secretary of State for Education and Science on his responsibilities for civil science with particular reference to the Research Council system, including the allocation of the Science Budget amongst the Research Councils and the other recipient bodies.
2. The Science Budget is intended to further scientific knowledge, to help to maintain a fundamental capacity for research and to support higher education. The Research Councils support research in their own units and establishments, in universities and international scientific organisations and make awards to postgraduate students in the sciences.
3. The Board's report "Science and Public Expenditure" covers basic scientific research carried out by the Agricultural and Food Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council, the Medical Research Council, the Natural Environment Research Council, the Science and Engineering Research Council and a number of smaller bodies.
4. The Secretary of State receives advice on these lines annually from the ABRC at the outset of each Public Expenditure Survey (PES). For the last 2 years the advice has been published, at the end of the calendar year, in the same volume as the ABRC's advice on the distribution of the Science Budget which is offered once the PES outcome is known. Publication has been brought forward this year to inform an adjournment debate in the House of Commons on Friday 14 June on the Government's policies for science.
5. The Secretary of State for Education and Science will consider the Board's advice during the course of this year's Public Expenditure Survey. The advice appears prior to decisions on the size and split of overall public spending for the period. When these are known, this autumn, the ABRC will provide the Secretary of State with further advice on the detailed allocation of the money made available between the individual Research Councils and smaller bodies.