

TRANSPORT

Wheels Keep on Turning

THE news that the Transport Committee of the Science Research Council has accepted the chief recommendations of the council's Transport Panel will be of little comfort to those academics who originally opposed the recommendations.

The transport panel was established in May 1968 to consider the role of the SRC in supporting university research in transport, to suggest the function of university research in the context of the national effort, and to develop for it a coherent policy. The report recommends that university transport research "should be treated as a priority area for finance and manpower", and proposes that the council's financial commitment should rise from £140,000 in 1968-9, to £550,000 by 1973-4. The transport panel says that universities already play a valuable role in transport research but their work is criticized for being too fragmented. The solution proposed is the SRC's standard one—concentration of effort.

The report suggests that three centres be established, one each for transport planning, transport management and control, and transport technology. A smaller marine transport centre is also an urgent requirement as "there is a clear lack of any university group studying the transport problems associated with ports and shipping". The centres will provide multi-disciplinary teams to study the problems of transport research on a theoretical rather than an experimental level but 25 per cent of SRC funds will still be available for research outside the centres.

The four centres have already been selected by the committee, but they are not being officially revealed until the Department of Education and Science has given approval. The proposal to create centres met with appreciable opposition from the Universities Transport Study Group (which claims members in about 35 universities) when the first draft of the report was offered to them and other interested bodies for comment. Many of the fears then expressed have been allayed by the council's assurances that researchers outside the centres will not become ineligible for support once the centres start operating.

In spite of these assurances a number of academics still believe transport research does not require concentration of the type proposed, but feel finance should simply be given to those with promising ideas, rather than to centres which it is piously hoped will then attract ideas. It is felt that if the wrong universities are made centres they will not attract the best people—good academics will not follow after bad.

The SRC's answer, based on experience in other fields, is that the centres will prove attractive, and will draw new high class brains into transport research—which is one of the panel's main hopes. It also hopes that the long term programmes of the centres will attract short term contract work from industry and government departments (as has happened in the control engineering centres), which will in turn help the long term work. The status of the centres, however, will not be permanent and new centres will arise and old ones fall as and when necessary.

To be sure, academics welcome the moves, feeling that rationalization is required to provide larger teams and to prevent duplication of effort. The reaction of bodies outside the academic world is enthusiastic—British Rail, the Port of London Authority, and the Ports Council, for example, all welcome the idea.

It will be interesting to see if the implementation of the report's proposals eventually silences the critics, and indeed to see if the SRC will be able to afford the increased support it proposes.

RESEARCH COUNCILS

Plans for Manpower

THE Science Research Council has it in mind to limit the number of new postgraduate studentships (for research and for the shorter advanced courses) available next year to 3,850, the same number as were taken up at the beginning of this month. This is spelt out in the SRC report for 1970-71 (HMSO, £0.65), in which the present financial and employment situations are cited as the chief factors that have to be taken into account when the council makes its final decision. What are the likely effects of this and how will the composition of the postgraduate research population be altered?

Table 1 Numbers of SRC Research Studentships

	Chemistry	Total
1967-68	1,516	5,058
1968-69	1,529	5,322
1969-70	1,480	5,498
1970-71	1,515	5,727
1971-72	476*	2,230*
*New studentships commencing October 1971.		

The number of research studentships in some subjects has remained static or has even been reduced during the past few years, in spite of increases in the total number of awards. In chemistry, for example, the number of SRC studentships held during the past few years has fluctuated and the number in 1967-68 is the same as in 1970-71—although about thirty studentships are now separately awarded in enzyme

chemistry and polymer science. (The statistics in Table 1 include the co-operative awards in pure science (CAPS) which are expected to number 210 for all subjects in 1971-72.) The recent SRC chemistry report showed, however, that university chemistry departments have about 1.9 research students and graduate assistants for each staff member compared with about 1.2 per staff member in other subjects; the report goes on to recommend that the total number of SRC research studentships in chemistry should not be changed substantially in the near future.

An increase in the number of research studentships in computing science—from 101 to 110 between October 1969 and October 1970—is recorded in the annual report and the new computing science awards taken up this month number more than 50. The total number of studentships held in nuclear physics has remained almost constant at about 200 for the past two years but the total in other branches of physics has dropped slightly from 594 in 1969-70 to 582 in 1970-71; total numbers in the biological sciences have increased from 836 to 909 in the same two years.

The proportion of British research students funded by the SRC is about 50 per cent overall and the remainder are supported chiefly from university, industrial and private sources; the SRC's relative contribution does not appear to fluctuate very much—although there is a slight upward trend—probably because financial pressures usually bear on industry and on the SRC at the same time. Any levelling off in the availability of SRC training awards will probably mean that the number available in some subjects will not grow as quickly as in the past and that other subjects will suffer decreases in the numbers of awards allocated to them.

CONCORDE

Industrial Innovation

ONE third of the sub-contractors and suppliers to the British Aircraft Corporation for the Concorde project obtained spin-off benefits as a result, according to a report from the Centre for the Study of Industrial Innovation (*Aspects of Spin-off*, £0.50).

The report is the result of a survey among 161 of the 600 companies engaged on work for Concorde. Spin-off is taken to be not only the transfer of products developed for Concorde into other fields, but also the less tangible benefits such as the introduction of more effective quality control, or of new processes which have wider applications.

Spin-off in the tangible sense of new products was limited to only 14 per cent of the companies involved. The report