

been complaining that there are virtually no takers for the processes and technologies developed in CSIR laboratories. In fact, most public and private sector industries in India have favoured the wholesale import of foreign technology. This anomaly was said to be the motivation behind the handing over of the laboratories to user ministries. But the import of technology by the bureaucrats in the user ministries has continued unabated.

B. Radhakrishna Rao

NIH research grants

Trying new tricks

Washington

In an attempt to cut down on the amount of "time and effort" reporting required of scientists, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are being urged to try a new mechanism for funding research grants that would make the researcher financially accountable to his or her university or research institution rather than directly to the funding agency.

At present, NIH project grants — whose total value is about \$1,400 million, over half the total NIH research budget — are awarded on a "cost reimbursement" basis, under which the government agrees to cover all previously agreed costs that can be properly accounted for.

The proposal is to experiment with so-called "fixed obligation grants" (or "fixed price grants") where the research institution merely has to demonstrate to the funding agency that the scientific and technical goals of the research have been satisfactorily pursued.

"Time and effort" reporting is the most controversial of the strict new rules on accounting for research expenditures introduced last month by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in a document on cost principles known as Circular A-21.

These rules require all principal investigators to provide a semester-by-semester breakdown of the way they distribute their time between teaching, research, administration and other activities — and to report any change in this distribution to the federal government.

Federal auditors argue that this is necessary to ensure that money is being allocated and spent in the way agreed when a research grant is awarded. But scientists argue that in an over-zealous enthusiasm to minimize fraud and abuse — a popular target of congressional committees — the auditors are reducing the productivity of research laboratories for a minimal return.

Despite earlier protests, OMB had refused to delay the implementation of the new rules, the outcome of several years of negotiation. However, under continued pressure from universities, the agency is now prepared to discuss ways of reaching its accountability goals more effectively.

OMB has already agreed to experiment

at ten universities where "time and effort" reporting will be on a statistical basis rather than professor-by-professor. What is now being suggested, however, is considered by NIH director Dr Donald Frederickson to be revolutionary — "as radical as *Finnegan's Wake*".

The outlines of the proposal were presented to the NIH Directors' Advisory Committee (DAC) by Dr Linda Wilson, Associate Vice-Chancellor for Research at the University of Illinois in Urbana, and Mr James Kelly, previously Executive Vice-Chancellor of the State University of New York and a long-time proponent of fixed-price contracts.

The general idea is that there would be no change in the present pre-award proposal process for the selection of research and determining the amount of an award. However, post-award administration would be changed to delegate most of the responsibility to the recipient institution and the principal investigator, in particular the emphasis of accountability would be shifted from the allowability of costs and the adequacy of documentation to criteria that indicate "reasonableness of technical progress".

Supporters of this new proposal, which comes out of a recommendation made in a recent report from the National Commission on Research for Experiments in Grant-in-Aid Support for Research Institutions, argue that it should still be possible to build in enough controls to ensure that public funds are not misused (such as spot auditing checks). The new system might eliminate some existing problems, but there could be new ones. For example, by shifting prime responsibility for the financial conduct of the grant from the federal government to the research institution, tensions between the government and the institutions could be replaced by tensions between the institution and its principal investigators.

Additional pressure would also be incurred on efforts to measure scientific accountability; Dr Wilson emphasizes that research grants should be treated as *assistance* rather than *procurement* funds, to avoid the rigid accountability — and hence loss of flexibility.

Mr Kelly told members of the DAC that there was little evidence that a new system for administering grants would save much money and that any increase in research productivity would not necessarily be measurable. The principal advantage, he said, was that the new approach might reduce tensions between universities and the federal government, currently running high in the wake of the introduction of Circular A-21.

Any experiments in this direction are likely to receive the approval of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), whose associate director, Dr Denis Prager, told the committee that reducing non-budgetary constraints on research was one of OSTP's top priorities, particularly by

encouraging forms of regulation based on performance.

Polish academy

Flexing muscle

Polish scientists wishing to travel abroad for professional purposes should in future find it considerably less complicated to obtain the necessary passport. Last week, Dr Jan Kaczmarek, Academic Secretary of the Polish Academy of Sciences, announced that the academy now has the right to decide such matters for its members.

This announcement marks a small, but significant step towards the greater academic autonomy widely demanded by Polish intellectuals in the wake of the Gdansk accords. It was made at an extraordinary general meeting of the Polish Academy of Sciences, which was called to discuss and re-evaluate the role of the academy, and of the scientific establishment generally, in the light of the recent changes in the country. The meeting, which participants reported had a warm and open atmosphere, made some sharp criticisms about the situation in Poland during the past few years, in particular, both the over-centralistic attitude of the authorities, which made it extremely difficult to get a

No stay for badgers



This will be a bad week for British badgers. Today (Thursday, 30 October) Lord Zuckerman's report on the practice of gassing badgers thought to be infected with bovine tuberculosis will be made public. This issue is contentious among conservationists because the Badger Act, carried through the British parliament with some emotion, which makes it a criminal offence to kill badgers even when they damage land and crops, provided an exemption for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to allow the destruction of badger hides thought to be a reservoir of bovine tuberculosis.

Conservationists have since protested that the practice of gassing badgers for the sake of protecting cattle has been too widely licensed, and that it is in any case unnecessary or ineffective. Lord Zuckerman's report it thought to argue in an opposite direction.