

UK research careers

ARMS call for job security

PARTICIPANTS at a symposium held by the Association of Researchers in Medicine and Science (ARMS) last week heard vigorous calls for a planned career structure for science researchers in Britain. In a keynote speech, Dr J.P. Dickinson, the association's chairman, said that widespread lack of concern over the present system of research support, under which a high proportion of researchers are retained on short-term contracts, means that research workers are inadequately trained. ARMS was formed in July 1978 after an advertisement in *Nature* attracted worldwide support. Originally concerned with biomedical research, the association has now broadened its scope to cover all researchers in the United Kingdom. One of its objectives is that a higher proportion of researchers should be retained on a professional basis beyond the age of 35. This, the association says, could be achieved within the existing research budget by reducing the overall recruitment to research careers by 20 per cent.

ARMS admits that its proposals would reduce the number of research projects in progress but believes that, by employing senior and experienced staff with professional status, productivity would be increased. The case is backed up by a detailed model of a proposed career structure in medical research.

ARMS is at pains to make clear that it is not calling for life-long security of tenure for researchers, but rather what it calls "improved continuity". There should be a professional body to guard the interests of career researchers, and changes in the mechanism of research support are proposed that would retain the positive features of the present system (sensitivity to budget constraints) while ensuring that proper account is taken of overhead costs at research institutions. A unified administration would, according to Dr Dickinson, serve the interests of science by promoting interdisciplinary mobility.

Other participants echoed the need for mobility. Dr J.B. Wyngaarden, director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), stressed that the lack of an adequate career structure for biomedical researchers was an international problem, and pointed out how scholarship schemes run by NIH within a roughly level real budget have stimulated medical practitioners to enter research.

Professor W.S. Peart, of St Mary's Hospital, argued that clinical departments should make a practice of employing some non-clinical researchers to promote the exchange of scientific and medical views. Researchers should, he said, have more say in policy decisions.

Others were more concerned with the lot of young researchers and PhD students. Professor W.L. Ford, of the University of

Manchester, called for the "scandalously low" level of support for research students to be doubled, with a concomitant reduction in numbers. Other speakers urged the universities to grant full academic status to all their researchers and

to bring an end to the practice of insisting on waiver clauses in contracts which deny employment protection rights to those who sign them.

ARMS proposals would require radical changes in policy by research councils and universities. But the stress it is placing on financial realism and the benefits to science should ensure that it is at least listened to.

Tim Beardsley

University of Oxford

Selection process ripe for reform

PROPOSALS for simplifying the admission of undergraduates to the University of Oxford have been put forward by a committee under the chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Dover, president of Corpus Christi College. The major change proposed is that those applying to the university on the basis of their school-leaving "A-level" examinations should not in future take the special Oxford entrance examination. The committee says its proposals would probably increase the proportion of admissions from maintained (state) schools.

Oxford admissions policy has been controversial for two reasons (see *Nature* 24 March, p.277). The first is the charge of elitism: as the Dover committee puts it, "An Oxford college is still often perceived... as a club for decent chaps and well brought up girls". Last year, 47 per cent of admissions were from independent ("public") schools, attended by about 5 per cent of pupils in their age group. This imbalance reflects the high proportion of applicants from such schools: 39 per cent last year. Many maintained schools do not encourage their pupils to apply to Oxford.

The second source of controversy is the complexity of the admissions procedure. Since this was last rationalized in 1962, many of the colleges — which are constitutionally autonomous — have introduced reforms of their own, with the result that an applicant is now faced with a range of entrance options that varies between colleges and between subjects.

For some combinations of studies, the entrance examination must be taken, while for others entrance may be on the basis of an interview and reports; colleges have markedly different policies. This complexity is considered by some to deter potential applicants, especially those at schools without an established tradition of sending students to Oxford. The practice of letting post-A level applicants compete in the entrance examination with pre-A level applicants has also been criticized because it encourages early specialization and because many independent schools have expertise in post-A level coaching that maintained schools cannot provide. The system also creates difficulties for those trying to assess candidates' potential. The Dover committee was charged with finding

a simplified entrance procedure likely to be acceptable to all the colleges.

The thirteen college representatives on the committee acknowledge the "extraordinary complexity" of their task. As expected, a quota system to regulate the intake from different types of schools was rejected, on the grounds that this would inevitably prejudice academic standards. The committee says that pre-A level candidates should be free to choose whether or not to take the entrance examination, and that colleges should not in future set quotas for admissions with and without the examination. But the proposals contain nothing to prevent colleges preferring one or other mode of entrance from exercising their preferences; colleges are simply asked not to "push" applicants in one or other direction.

The Dover committee says that the practice of awarding scholarships to promising applicants before admission, on the basis of their performance in the entrance examination, should be ended. The awards, which are of little financial value, would in future be made only after admission. The present system has again been criticized for encouraging excessive specialization. Until recently, the main function of the awards was to allow less popular colleges to secure good applicants by offering scholarships which candidates were then obliged to take up. Many Cambridge colleges have already decided to abandon the scholarship system.

Dover's recommendations, though falling short of the radical proposals some had hoped for, will be popular with schools, especially maintained schools. Dr John Rae, headmaster of Westminster School (a leading independent school), says that the new scheme would ensure that justice is seen to be done. But it would be unwise to assume that all 29 of the colleges admitting undergraduates will find the recommendations acceptable, despite the committee's plea for unity. One likely consequence if the proposals were adopted would be an increase in the proportion of pre-A level candidates electing to take the entrance examination. Until now the promise or the hope of places reserved for non-examined candidates may have helped some colleges to attract promising students.

Tim Beardsley