UK councils face £7.5 million 'efficiency' cuts

London. Britain's five research councils, shortly to be reorganized into six following the publication of last year's science white paper (policy document), have agreed to cut their administrative costs next year by £7.5 million (US$10 million) to help ensure increased funding for industrially-related research projects.

William Waldegrave, the minister for science, said in a Parliamentary debate last week that the heads of the research councils had been persuaded to provide money from "efficiency savings" to a central fund.

The money being made available in this way has been matched by a similar amount of "new money" provided by the Treasury. This will provide a total of £15.4 million, which will be redistributed to support research and postgraduate training that meet the goals of the white paper, namely focusing resources on fields expected to contribute to wealth creation.

According to Waldegrave, the reallocation of funding "augurs well for the increased efficiency that we are looking for." But representatives of the Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists, the union which represents many of those employed by the research councils, warns that job losses among administrative staff are "almost inevitable." Union officials points out that the planned "efficiency savings" coincide with an exercise launched by the government to discover which research council institutes are potential candidates for privatization, a move which they fear could also produce further staff reductions.

The biggest efficiency savings are being sought by the Science and Engineering Research Council, the bulk of whose activities will be divided from April 1 between two new councils, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), and the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council.

The EPSRC has agreed to finds ways of saving £3 million in administration costs, and PPARC £500,000. These figures compare with a total overhead expenditure by the SERC of about £25 million.

According to an SERC spokesman, some of the savings will result from the planned merger between the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory and the Daresbury Laboratories, and others from the introduction of a single management structure for the council's two UK observatories. But cuts are also likely to be made in support for the public understanding of science, and in staff training.

Nicholas Winterton, director of corporate affairs at the Medical Research Council, said that the MRC was planning to make further efficiency savings of £1.5 million on top of reductions already planned.

"We will be looking for further savings across the board," says Winteron. He adds that some of the MRC's expenditure plans for the next financial year may have to be postponed as a result, but that no reductions are expected to fall on research grants.

The least stoical of the research councils has been the Economic and Social Research Council, whose planned efficiency savings, although only totalling £200,000, still represents a significant proportion of overall administrative costs which have already been cut back significantly in recent years.

David Dickson

Major: science part of 'back to basics'

London. Britain's Prime Minister, John Major, last week signalled a further step away from the science policies of his predecessor, Mrs Margaret (now Lady) Thatcher, by arguing that the government's support for science represents a key element of its "back to basics" campaign.

In the mid-1980s, Thatcher's officials justified cuts in the science budget on the grounds that science was a luxury that could be afforded only when a country became rich, and denied the need for a coherent policy for science and technology.

But Major told the annual luncheon of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee — a body made up of both parliamentarians with an interest in science and research leaders from the academic and industrial community — that making the best use of the nation's scientific abilities was a "common-sense, basic building-block for civilized living".

The "back to basics" campaign is designed to focus political support on social priorities. Major said that, in preparing for last year's white paper (policy document) on the organization of science, the government had been "clearly right" to question its previous role.

He pointed out that, despite the need to restrain public expenditure, spending on the science base was expected to rise in real terms next year. Major also promised that "science will remain a high priority in future".

Major's remarks were welcomed by the group Save British Science (SBS), which said that it had "come a long way" since pleas for greater political support for science fell on deaf ears in the mid-1980s. But John Mulvey, the secretary of SBS, says that funding prospects remain fragile. "If the positive commitments made are, as John Major says, aspects of his 'back to basics' theme, then we need more 'basics' — and fast," says Mulvey. □

Waldegrave announces new awards

London. A new award scheme with the somewhat unattractive name of ROPA — named after last year's science white paper (policy document) *Realizing our Potential* — was launched last week by Britain's minister for science, William Waldegrave, in a move designed to stimulate research in areas promising to contribute to wealth creation.

Awards under the new scheme, which will be run jointly by three research councils, will be made to scientists who wish to work on long-term projects with potential industrial applications, and are already receiving support from industry.

The government has promised to provide £3.5 million (US$5.2 million) in the financial year beginning on 1 April for a six-month pilot scheme for the new awards. It is one of a package of initiatives totalling £15.4 million which the government has decided to fund in addition to previous plans for the research councils.

In line with the priorities outlined in the white paper, the government is to provide an extra £2 million to an 'innovative manufacturing' programme to be run by the new Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, £3.4 million to the human and animal genome and immunology programmes of the Medical Research Council and £4 million for chemistry research.

It has agreed to allocate an additional £600,000 to the CASE award scheme, designed to back postgraduate students carrying out research projects partly in an industrial environment, and also to increase the number of fellowships offered to young scientists through the Royal Society's University Research Fellowships Scheme.

But the government has turned down a request from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to provide continued funding for a programme of research into risk and behaviour. This move prompted the chairman of the ESRC, Howard Newby, to break ranks with his fellow chairmen by announcing his "disappointment" with the government's deliberations on how the new money should be distributed.

Announcing the details of the new funding in a parliamentary debate, Waldegrave said that a unique feature of the ROPAs awards is that industry's recognition of researchers — rather than traditional peer review — would be used as an indicator of quality and relevance, giving industry a "major role" in identifying which researchers should be supported. □