

Materials Research Support in United Kingdom Undergoes Review

The Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), the major source of research funding for the British universities, has recently been looking into the adequacy of the level and nature of materials research in the United Kingdom. Questionnaires were sent out to relevant university departments and advice taken from senior industrialists and overseas referees. The data, received and analyzed by a six-member review panel, is due to be officially reported soon.

The six-member review panel presented a preliminary summary of its findings at a "Town Meeting" held in London towards the end of 1987. The meeting was held as the final stage of the information-gathering program to collect additional open opinions and advice. It was attended by more than 200 academics and industrialists. The following is a summary of the meeting.

Many figures reflecting the statistical oddities of the group structure of the major committees of the SERC were presented. (The present structure consists of separate Science and Engineering Boards, each with its own special committees. Physics and chemistry fall within the Science Board, while the Materials Committee is part of the Engineering Board). For example, between 1984 and 1987, while the Chemistry Committee spent only 2%

of its money outside of U.K. university chemistry departments, the Materials Committee spent between 13 and 18%, and the Physics Committee less than 1% on chemistry. Funding for polymer research, it transpired, came almost exclusively from the Materials Board, and only negligible amounts were awarded by the Physics and Chemistry Boards.

In comparing polymer research figures with those from overseas it was noted that IBM had given \$22 million to U.S. universities, while in the United Kingdom the only similar expenditure in this area was a £300,000 (approximately \$555,000) initiative from ICI and SERC. In composites, the meeting was told, 53% of all research proposals were funded by SERC in 1979-80, but only 14% were funded in 1983-84. The number and scale of grants for ceramics, metals, and semiconductor materials were also reported to be disappointingly small. For ceramics in 1987, for example, 87% of applications were unfunded. A halving of SERC spending in materials over the past year has not helped.

The most common complaints in the returned questionnaires were on the general low level of funding and quality of trained workers. It was also thought that the interdisciplinary nature of modern materials research was not ideally suited by the structure of SERC. A large number of complaints mentioned that no reasons are usually given if a proposal is turned down for funding.

Industrial opinions suggested that universities should organize more two- and three-day refresher courses for industrial scientists, and arrange more frequent staff exchanges to strengthen ties. Noted again was the poor state of U.K. research in relation to the U.S. situation, itself under assessment in the polymer area as a consequence of recent Japanese advances.

In the general discussion that followed, the opinion was that a strengthened materials awareness in the United Kingdom, such as has developed in the United States through the Materials Research Society, could benefit the subject. The view was also expressed that SERC's Engineering Board, under which the Materials Committee operates, does not give sufficient priority to materials research, and that perhaps a restructuring of the boards and committees would be favored. A straw poll was taken at the end of the meeting. About one third of those attending voted to leave things unchanged. Half of the rest thought that the present materials committee could be replaced by a joint Engineering/Science Board with all Science Board Committees unchanged, and half thought that a new Materials Board should be formed to include all materials interests presently scattered throughout many different boards and committees.

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