

Researchers forced to approach industry for money

by John Gushue
Science and Technology Writer of Canadian University Press
OTTAWA (CUP) — University researchers may be trading in lab coats for business suits following the Feb. 26 budget recommendations of increased private sector financing for campus labs.

While the country's three research granting bodies — the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Medical Research Council — have all been given sustained funding for five years, they have all been told to attract more funding from private industry.

In his budget statement, Finance Minister Michael Wilson said an extra \$300 million dollars over five years will be allotted to all three councils, and that the government will match dollar for dollar all private sector contributions to each council, to a maximum of six per cent. He said he was confident the scheme would work, and that "contact between the business and academic communities would be improved."

Canadian University Press asked Wilson how he knows business will answer the challenge and invest money in the councils.

"This is an experiment," Wilson said. "I've talked to a number of people. They are giving a great deal of support (to this plan). We believe they will rise to the occasion."

"We don't want the private sector going off (quietly) in their own corner doing their research and the granting councils in their corner."

"We're trying to build a greater degree of co-operation. We want to see how this evolves but there is a potential of raising \$1 billion for research and development," Wilson said.

Initial reaction for NSERC and SSHRC, who submitted comprehensive five-year funding plans to the government last summer, is hesitant. Both councils had asked for much more than the government has provided saying their requests were the minimum needed for sufficient research and development in Canadian laboratories.

"The research community shouldn't get overly enthusiastic," said NSERC president Gordon McNabb. "We're starting this exercise with a fall — we need \$14 million just to bring us back up to the level of last year's funding."

He said the \$300 million allotment will not satisfy each council's needs. "NSERC alone needs \$380 million (to match last year's levels) — I don't know how we're going to manage this. There are an awful lot of questions," he said.

McNabb is pleased the government has made a long-term commitment to university research. "Given the economic circumstances, it's not too bad. I think we're being given preferred treatment, and for the first time, we've been given assured multi-year funding," he said.

But he doesn't think the government accounted for inflation in its grant. "I can only conclude that the secure base of funding that we've been given does not include inflation protection," McNabb said.

McNabb also said NSERC is not prepared to recruit industrial investment for university researchers.

"It's a Catch-22. We barely have enough staff to do what we have to, let alone get out there and talk to industry. The question is, where are the human resources going to come from?" he said.

"We can't do it ourselves." McNabb said researchers themselves will have to bear the brunt of attracting new income for their projects. "I look upon this as a challenge. It's up to the individual researcher to get up off his or her butt and go out there and talk (with industry)," he said.

Jeff Holmes of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council said SSHRC will not formally respond to the budget announcement until its regular meeting on March 21. But, "in the context of the budget, we were pleased they at least recognized our needs for guaranteed funding. We've never had that before," he said.

"It's not anything like what we

asked for in our five-year plan, but compared to other programmes, it's not bad," Holmes said.

He said SSHRC is unsure how the private sector arrangement will work. "Much of our work applies to society and industry in general, rather than a particular business. We don't know how this arrangement is going to work."

Howard McCurdy, NDP critic for Science and technology said the

announcement regarding university research "really is bad news. It's shameful, almost a catastrophic response to a very well documented need."

McCurdy said government has backtracked on its previous commitment to research and development.

Low limits to some expenditures, as well as no increase for equipment purchases, could spell trou-


ble for incoming and young researchers, McCurdy said. "Newer, more junior researchers are hardly going to be adequately funded. The government has totally disregarded the need for new research in Canadian universities," he said.

The government has not yet responded to other proposals in the SSHRC and NSERC five-year

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