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Cuts at SERC halt Alvey research

John Lamb

RESEARCH into future British computers is being held up by cuts at the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), which funds academic work. Some 17 projects in the Alvey Programme of research into advanced computing are hanging fire because academic workers cannot be sure of money from the SERC next year.

The council is short of £2 million to finance work that has already been approved on technical grounds. Worst hit is the latest part of the Alvey Programme to do with computer architecture, the design of computers which could form the basis of the British computer industry in the future. Half of the 14 projects cannot begin because the money has not been found.

Tony Egginton, director of engineering at the SERC, says that there is little chance that he can find the missing millions. Brian Oakley, director of the Alvey Programme, has warned that projects will have to be axed unless the money is found from the SERC itself or its industrial partners in Alvey projects.

The computer architecture section of Alvey involves the largest electronics companies in Britain, including GEC, ICL,

STC, Ferranti, Racal, British Telecom and Plessey. Computer architecture was not a separate stream of Alvey originally, but since it became part of the Alvey Programme a year ago, the Alvey Directorate has authorised projects worth over £27 million.

Oakley describes the cash flow problem as "a little local difficulty". It has come about for three reasons, he says. First, the SERC has been unable to find all of the £12.5 million it was asked to contribute to Alvey. Secondly, universities have been keener on Alvey than expected, particularly departments outside computer science such as physics and chemistry. Lastly, the SERC has used some of its Alvey money to fund projects started before Alvey began.

Up to now, university applications for Alvey grants have been treated on a basis of first come first served. But researchers now face a weeding out process to make room for the all-important architectural work. Manchester University and Imperial College, London, are considered to be as advanced in research into high-power parallel computers as their counterparts in

Japan or America, where large investments in research have already been made.

Alvey's computer architecture programme is centred on a £15.5-million project called Flagship, which involves ICL, Plessey, Imperial College and Manchester University. The partners are working on parallel computers and computer languages to run on them which will be used by other teams in Alvey.

Apart from computers, the architecture project also includes research into networks to link different kinds of computer and peripherals, as well as databases for systems based on human knowledge rather than straightforward data.

● Despite the funding problems with Alvey, those involved in the scheme are already looking towards Alvey II. The Department of Trade and Industry hopes to set up an industry working party to look into future government support of information technology. Geoffrey Pattie, information technology minister, speaking at a conference on Alvey held in Edinburgh last week, made it clear that future British computer research will rely more on European programmes such as Esprit and Eureka, than home grown schemes. □

THIS WEEK