

without being able to persuade a university department to teach him what he wants to learn. (The continuing complexity of course requirements is in the edition for 1967-68 of *A Compendium of University Entrance Requirements for First Degree Courses in the United Kingdom*, Association of Commonwealth Universities, 14s. 6d.) But the Committee of Vice-Chancellors has embarked on a study of that problem too, even though a commonly agreed solution cannot be reached for two years or more. Five sub-committees of the vice-chancellors' committee are studying the course requirements of universities in the physical sciences and mathematics, biological sciences, medicine, humanities and the social sciences. Those serving on these committees are said to be surprised at the way in which universities are prepared to relax previously stringent requirements, but it remains to be seen whether this tendency will be sufficient to allow the schools, in their turn, to liberalize curricula.

Too Much Room at the Top

THE general impression in British universities that the shortage of laboratory technicians is most acute at the top of the salary scale has been confirmed by a study carried out by the Edinburgh branch of the Association of University Teachers. While most of the research workers in the various departments of the university were dissatisfied with the number of technicians available, a "considerable body" was convinced that the number of junior technicians was too high compared with that of more senior people. Among the reasons for this imbalance is the lack of a suitable career structure for university laboratory technicians. In particular, salary scales are too low and, the authors of the study infer, "the university is at present becoming a training ground for technicians which is increasingly valued by outside employers". This conclusion, based on a systematic survey of seventeen departments at the university, is borne out by the impressions of universities elsewhere.

One of the recommendations which arise from the survey at Edinburgh is that there should be a general improvement of salary scales and that in particular the Whitley Council scale should be adopted by all and not merely by some departments. Another suggestion is that the more senior people should in future salary reviews be more generously treated than those at the bottom of the ladder. It is also suggested that promotion to senior technician should not be determined by vacancies at this level, but that this grade should be recognized as one to which qualified and capable technicians would in due course automatically graduate.

The authors of the survey also have a number of suggestions to make about the training of technicians. In the first place it was thought that more could be done by the teaching staff of departments to help with the training of technical staff. Apparently, at Edinburgh day release for junior technicians is habitual and many departments even allow day release to technicians who are older than 21. In the long run it is thought that much could be done to bring more technicians into research work, especially during vacations, and also that those public bodies which award research grants should take fuller account of the need of technical assistance and the need that technical assistants should have some promise of a secure job,

possibly beyond the duration of the research grant concerned.

These findings and suggestions will no doubt be widely echoed in other British universities. More is likely to be heard of this issue in the autumn, when the Committee on Scientific Manpower under Sir Willis Jackson is due to report on this and other matters.

Use More Wood

THE Forest Products Research Laboratory of the Ministry of Technology has been devoting more of its time and resources to the considerable problems of wastage in the use of timber. In the introduction to the annual report for 1965, Mr. B. K. Blount, chairman of the laboratory's Steering Committee, says that timber and timber products represent 10 per cent, or £500 million, of all imports into the United Kingdom in a year, and that imports of sawn timber and plywood alone account for more than £200 million. While the supply of home grown timber is increasing, so is the demand; and it is likely that Britain will continue to depend on imported timber for most of its supply. The report says, however, that "economies could be achieved by improvements in processing methods, by the wider application of correct methods of timber usage and by the utilization of low-quality wood which is at present neglected or discarded".

The laboratory plans to work in close collaboration with the public authority recently set up by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works to evaluate new building components and materials; test work on timber materials will be carried out at the Forest Products Laboratory where it is thought that the interest of the authority will complement its own increasing appreciation of the structural value of wood in building. New methods of construction with timber provide the substance of several investigations being undertaken for industry.

Computing Centre

THE National Computing Centre is slowly building up steam, and has just ordered its first computer, an English Electric Leo Marconi *KDF9*, which should be installed by next April. In the meantime, recruiting is under way and work has begun on the site at Manchester.

The present cost of the centre, which was established as a public company in June, is being borne by the Ministry of Technology, but the Ministry's grant of £290,000 for the first year of operation will not go far when the *KDF9* alone costs £400,000. Professor Gordon Black, the director of the centre, hopes that it will be independent of the government within a few years, through dues from member organizations and payment for services.

One of the centre's first acts has been to support a one-year course for systems analysts being started this October at Imperial College, London. Professor Black considers that this course, which will combine computer techniques with optional subjects ranging from accountancy to operational research, fulfils a major need. There is a possibility of another course being offered at the London School of Economics early in 1967. Professor Black also sees the centre as advising industry at large on the use of computers. He hopes