

EDUCATION

Open University Open

THE Open University was launched this week with the publication of the report of the Planning Committee (HMSO, 4s). "It's one of the most important things done by this Government", confided Mr Edward Short, Secretary of State for Education and Science, who, unable to resist the historical parallel, went on to compare the efforts of Miss Jenny Lee, who was at his side, with those of her late husband Mr Aneurin Bevan, who launched the National Health Service during the last period of Labour Government. But even if this comparison was putting it a bit strong, there is no denying the enthusiasm for the Open University among its sponsors last week. "We've got to make the best more generally available", Miss Lee said, adding that she would tolerate no dilution of academic standards or freedoms. Sir Peter Venables, Chairman of the Planning Committee, admitted that there was "not altogether an excess of enthusiasm for this enterprise in some quarters", but said that the number of applicants to join the staff—more than 1,000 so far—was in sharp contrast to the attitude of the doubters.

The planning report sets out in some detail what the Open University will try to do, and what it is likely to cost. The first year of university training will be taken up with "foundation courses", designed to familiarize students with the main lines of study. These will be offered in mathematics, understanding science, literature and culture and understanding society. Each foundation course completed successfully will represent one credit, and each student will be required to score two credits before he can go on to the next part of the course. At this stage, each line will be broken down into more specialized disciplines, limited to start with by the availability of broadcasting time to about four components to each line. Students will be as free as possible to choose any combination of courses from any of the lines. For ordinary degrees, six credits will be required; for honours degrees, eight;

and the credits can be obtained over any number of years.

Nobody yet has any idea how many students will be attracted by the Open University. A survey carried out by the National Institute of Adult Education for the planning committee found that 5 per cent of adults over 21 years would be "very interested" in the Open University, and 0.9 per cent said that they would "certainly be one of the first students". Over the whole country, this suggests that the number intending to register as students would be somewhere between 34,000 and 150,000. There is in addition a large number of teachers who would, the report suggests, be eager to upgrade their qualifications—there may be as many as 25,000 of these. This suggests a total student enrolment of somewhere between 60,000 and 175,000, but if the experience of the BBC is any guide, only about one per cent of the enrolment will actually complete the course successfully. The annual output of graduates might therefore fall between 6,000 and 17,500, but these estimates are so tentative that it is impossible to put any weight on them.

Costs are easier to assess. The broadcasting costs for a full year of operation will be about £1.8 million, and the cost of the university headquarters (which will be somewhere outside London, as yet undecided) will be £1.7 million. Total overhead costs when the university is fully operational will be £3.5 million, to which must be added some unquantifiable direct student costs. But whatever these are, the planning committee remains confident that the costs per student will certainly fall below those for conventional universities. In any case, as the committee points out, direct comparison is unfair, because the Open University students will all be in employment and contributing to the GNP, while conventional students are not.

The report has little to say about postgraduate education or research, but it does make the recom-



Gathered for the publication of the Open University Planning Committee report: (from l. to r.) Lord Crowther, Chancellor of the Open University; Mr Edward Short, Secretary of State for Education and Science; Miss Jennie Lee, Minister of State at the DES; Sir Peter Venables, Chairman of the Planning Committee; and Professor Walter Perry, Vice-Chancellor designate.

mentation that the university should concentrate on post-experience courses rather than the more conventional postgraduate courses which are taken immediately after graduation. It identifies two types of post-experience course: those needed by people who have to make a significant shift into a different type of activity, like scientists going into management; and those needed periodically by people who simply want to keep up with developments in their own field. Both

types should be provided by the university, although it seems likely that the rate at which they can be introduced will depend on the availability of broadcasting time. On research, the report simply says that the staff of the university "would be able to devote a significant proportion of their time to private study and research", without suggesting how much. This, no doubt, will be for the staff of the university to decide.

Towards More Legislation on Drugs

THE immediate response of the British Government to the report of the Wootton Committee on cannabis published two weeks ago has been firm and predictable. On two occasions in the House of Commons in the past week, Mr James Callaghan, the Home Secretary, has made no bones about his unwillingness to change the law so as to provide more lenient penalties for cannabis than for other drugs of dependence. On both occasions, Mr Callaghan was echoed by Mr Quintin Hogg, the spokesman on this subject for the Opposition in the House of Commons. Although there has been no formal opportunity to count heads, it does seem very much as if most Members of Parliament share the views of the Home Secretary, and that the "pot lobby" as he called it has a very long way to go in Britain.

The essence of what the Home Secretary had to say on January 23 was that he finds it hard to reconcile the view of the committee that the wider use of cannabis should not be encouraged with its advocacy of less stern penalties for the possession of cannabis than for other drugs. For one thing, he complained that the committee had not forecast the likely consequences of such a decision. He went on to say that if the British Government were to reduce the penalties on cannabis, people would think that "the government takes a less than serious view of drug taking". He emphasized that the British Government's position is still defined by its adherence to the resolution of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which last year recommended that "all countries increase their efforts to eradicate the abuse and illicit traffic in cannabis".

In a debate on the Wootton report on Monday this week, Mr Callaghan did also acknowledge that the committee had fairly argued that the law is now satisfactory in some respects, although it seems clear that Mr Callaghan had principally in mind the way in which people have recently been prosecuted for allowing their houses to be used for smoking cannabis without having known that this was being done. Mr Callaghan's case for saying that no changes are needed in the law was strengthened by the way in which one of the most remarkable cases of this kind—the conviction of a young woman because the tenants of her rented house were found with cannabis—had only a few days earlier been dismissed after a legal appeal to the House of Lords.

The way in which the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence came out last week with a reaffirmation of its previous view that cannabis must continue to be controlled will do very little to clarify public or even official attitudes towards the drug. The publication of the committee's sixteenth report coincided with

the meeting in Geneva of the United Nations Narcotics Commission. The report repeats what the committee has said on previous occasions—that "cannabis is a drug of dependence, producing public health and social problems, and that its control must be continued". The section on cannabis goes on to say that there is a need for "more basic data" on the acute and chronic effects of cannabis on the individual and society before an accurate assessment can be made of the degree of hazard to public health. The isolation and synthesis of the tetrahydrocannabinols have made the problem more urgent. There is nothing in the report to echo or even deny the view of the Wootton Committee (see *Nature*, 221, 205; 1969) that the effects of cannabis are usually so much less severe than those of other drugs that penal systems should be less severe on cannabis.

Mr Callaghan's declarations on both occasions make it plain, however, that the British Government is planning a thorough revision of the law on drug abuse. For one thing, the Home Secretary is worried about the potentialities of drugs only newly synthesized or isolated from natural materials—he singled out STP for special mention earlier this week. But he also acknowledges the need for extra flexibility, not so much by varying the penalties to suit the drug (the courts can do that if they wish) but by providing the authorities with an opportunity to move quickly whenever this should seem necessary. On Monday this week, Mr Callaghan said that he would like not to have to rely on voluntary agreements with manufacturers to keep specified drugs off the market, that he is alarmed at the way in which doctors "are prescribing in ways quite opposed to all the social views of the House of Commons" and that there is a danger that "each new fashion of drug taking will find new gaps in our defences". What he is looking for—and working on—is a "single comprehensive code to rationalize and strengthen government powers and to allow them to act flexibly in the difficult and dangerous problems likely to arise in the years ahead".

Cannabis is, however, by no means the committee's chief concern. The meeting last September on which the new report is based seems to have been intended, by the WHO secretariat, to provide background material for the reassessment of the international regulations on the control of drugs which is now being carried out by the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs. Although the WHO has no formal influence on the decisions of the commission, its pronouncements do inevitably carry weight. On this