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What universities should aim at

The die may not be finally cast on British university policy. The universities should quickly propose a reform of the system of student maintenance grants.

For the past several weeks, there has been a curious lull in the storm about the future of the British universities. The belief that the British government could not seriously intend the beastliness it first advertised fifteen months ago has in most places been dispelled, and universities have dutifully set about making the self-inflicted wounds that their reduced budgets require. Most of them have been spurred on by the knowledge that they may not be able to share in the £220 million with which the University Grants Committee has been provided to compensate redundant academics unless their claims are staked about now. Temporarily at least, however, the lull has now been unexpectedly broken by no less a person than Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, in a long letter to the London *Times* last week. Inevitably, his intervention will tempt some to hope that all is not yet lost. Is there a chance that, even at this late stage, the British government might be persuaded to change its mind?

The circumstances which have provoked this public statement are significant. The minister had apparently been stung by the pointed criticism of Dr Robin Marris, professor of economics at Birkbeck College in London, whose complaints appear to have been all the more forceful because they acknowledged that there is an economic need for the British government to contain economic expenditure. This is a point that the universities should have conceded, more generously, at the outset of their long wrangle with the government. That would have enabled them more strenuously now to complain that, as things have turned out, the university system is likely to become less and not more efficient.

The planned reduction of student numbers is likely to be proportionately less than the reduction of the teaching force, so that the ratios of students to teachers at many universities will be "improved". There is, however, a high chance that the teachers who will volunteer to leave their jobs in the next few months will include many of those whose departure can least be afforded. Similarly, as teaching departments shrink, teaching staffs will be less able to cover the ground expected of them, while buildings and other equipment will be less than fully used. One glimmer of hope in last week's public statement is the promise that the University Grants Committee will be allowed some room for manoeuvre. Moreover, Sir Keith has now agreed that if academics nationally agree to salary increases which are less than four per cent, the money thus saved could be used for other purposes, and that the University Grants Committee will similarly behave leniently towards individual universities. So far, however, there is no sign that the government will allow a relaxation of the principle from which the most absurd diseconomies spring — its insistence that the numbers of students taught at British universities should now decline.

The ceilings on the numbers of home students which have been set, nationally and for individual universities, are absurd for several reasons. They are diseconomies in the sense that they prevent the full utilization of a well developed university system. They are inequitable, and an arbitrary infringement of academic freedom and university autonomy, in that they limit the right of universities to decide for themselves what to teach, and to whom. The quotas are certain needlessly to deprive young men and women leaving British schools of a university education. So why should the government perversely persist with its support for student quotas (technically, it is true, devised by the University

Grants Committee)? Sir Keith Joseph had two comments on this issue last week. Letting universities decide for themselves their responses to shrunken budgets is unacceptable because the universities depend on the public purse and because "planning" is necessary for universities as for the other sectors of higher education. Then, more to the point, student numbers entail a hidden cost to the public purse because of the government's commitment to reimburse local authorities required by legislation to pay maintenance grants to students following first degree courses anywhere in the system of higher education. For the past year, the government has been muttering that these arrangements provide the universities with a blank cheque on its resources. Student quotas conveniently give an upper limit to the annual bill.

The government's preoccupation with the supposed blank cheque is irrational. In 1979–80, local authorities in England and Wales spent £192 million on maintenance grants to university students, when the recurrent budget of the University Grants Committee (for the whole of the United Kingdom) was £801 million. In that year, the average cost of maintenance grants was just over £1,000 a student — less than the maximum amount because individual awards are means-tested on the basis of parental income. In the same year, local authorities paid university fees of £137 million on behalf of their students, an amount that will be reduced from next September by the simple device of reducing by a half the notional cost of university fees for students from the United Kingdom (thus penalizing universities that have taken in extra students in the past two years). In happier times, the social value of this system was not seriously questioned. The system has, for example, partially ensured that students are not discouraged from going on to higher education because of the economic circumstances of their families. But the system is also wasteful. British students make only the smallest contributions towards the cost of their maintenance, and are tempted by the system to seek university places far from their homes, increasing the cost of student housing on university campuses.

These circumstances offer the basis for a better deal between the government and the universities than that now being implemented. In impoverished Britain, the simple abolition of the system of maintenance grants would have the effect of putting university education beyond the reach of a large and important section of the school-leaving population. But why not substitute for the present system of mandatory awards a system of scholarships awarded on merit to some tens of thousands of potential students each year? One result would be that the government would know the extent of its commitment each year. Another is that, by a suitable choice of numbers, students would have an incentive to opt for the most economical education they could find. Finally, provided that university fees were not driven sky-high by government decree, universities would have an incentive to educate as many young people as their resources (determined by the University Grants Committee on the government's behalf) would allow. The result of that would be far-reaching and important. For in such a system, universities would find they had an incentive towards diversity — not, as at present, a common ambition to ape the Oxbridge model. Given last week's evidence, flimsy though it is, that Sir Keith Joseph's mind is not finally closed, the universities should seize the chance to advocate some such scheme.