

British universities

Academic leaders answer back

BRITISH university vice-chancellors have made a stinging reply to the government's discussion paper on its future policy on higher education, saying that the policy document published last May is "blinkered". This strong language appears in the formal response to the policy document by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), the representative body of British university heads.

The document is chiefly significant for its directness, and for the bluntness of its language. On many occasions, CVCP has been able to make only a muffled response to statements of government policy because of differences of opinion among vice-chancellors, who are in any case unable to speak for their universities.

CVCP now says that last year's policy statement, technically a green (discussion) paper (see *Nature* 315, 265; 1985), "failed to address itself adequately to the problems which we face". "Nor did it display any sense of the way in which education is both necessity and catalyst in a modern society."

The CVCP response does not set out to be a full reply to all the points raised by the government, saying that its views may be taken as identical with those of the University Grants Committee (UGC) on matters not explicitly dealt with. The committee deals with the chief questions raised as follows.

Student numbers. CVCP disagrees with government projections that the numbers

of university students can be allowed to fall between now and 1995 (when the present demographic decline of the entry age-groups will begin to be reversed). Its report says flatly that there will be no decline in the demand for higher education, and points to the conflict between government statements about the importance of skill in a modern economy and its plans that the output of graduates from the universities should be reduced by 14 per cent by the end of the next decade. CVCP remarks that the proportion of people with first degrees in the British labour force was only 6 per cent in 1980, compared with 19 per cent in the United States, 13 per cent in Japan and 8 per cent in West Germany.

Tartly, CVCP also draws attention to the conflict between present policies and the green paper's own calculation of the "social rate of return" on funds spent on higher education, which concluded that the "gains from higher education overall are satisfactory even when these are limited to a purely financial calculation". If allowance were made for the benefits of personal development and other intangible consequences of higher education, CVCP says that investment in higher education might well yield returns twice as great as "from any comparable investment".

CVCP also points to the way in which the government's ambitions for an improvement in the quality of high-school education will be jeopardized by the decline in the numbers of graduates, noting that, in 1984, 30 per cent of physics teachers and 26 per cent of mathematics teachers had no qualifications in those subjects. In contrast, CVCP notes the conflict between the government's belief that the quality of school education can be improved and its assumption that this will not increase the demand for higher education.

Students' affairs. CVCP complains that the government has allowed the value of students' maintenance awards to decline by 12 per cent since the beginning of the decade, and has shifted an increasing proportion of the cost of higher education onto parents. It remarks that the government has failed to fulfill its promise to introduce a more rational system of student support, and says that if the government will not introduce an equitable system of student maintenance grants, it should devise a loan scheme instead. CVCP says that there should be more support for the European scheme to encourage the international movement of students, and that the government has "misjudged" the importance of "cultural diplomacy" in charging full fees to students from overseas.

Continuing education. The vice-chancellors accept that universities have a fuller part to play in the provision of post-experience education, but their document dissents from the government's view that the costs should mostly be borne either by industry or the individuals concerned. Noting that this policy ignores the national benefits of continuing education, the CVCP document insists that there should be at least two changes in the present arrangements; government help with the initial costs of post-experience courses and an understanding that fees paid by individuals for continuing education should be tax-deductible.

Research. CVCP notes the common misuse of the term "research" and suggests that part of the reason why technology transfer in Britain may have been laggard is the relatively small proportion of 1.6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) spent on civil research, compared with 2 per cent in the United States and 2.5 per cent in West Germany and Japan.

The document goes on to plead for a continuation of the practice by which research councils and UGC have jointly supported academic research, the latter by means of the annual subvention of universities. On links between academic and industrial research, CVCP says the reduction of the numbers of graduate students by about 10 per cent in the past decade works against the government's ambitions that universities should do more to help industry, that the potential usefulness of universities to help British industry by the publication of new knowledge has been impeded by the relative neglect of the scientific literature by the putative beneficiaries and that the government should set up a fund to assist with the direct exploitation of academic innovations.

Salaries. The CVCP response to last year's green paper is most scathing in what it has to say about the conditions under which university teachers work. It says that declining salaries have created "grievance and distrust" whose effects, by way of recruitment, will have the effect of making universities less efficient and effective. The present age-structure of British academic staff is such that too few vacancies will arise in each of the next ten years to allow for the replacement of 3.5 per cent of the teaching force each year, even if British universities had the funds to fill all vacant posts, which seems unlikely.

In sum, CVCP conveys an air of exasperation with the government's demands on British universities. "The government asks for more and thinks that it can provide less and less without adulterating the quality of what is produced. The response to the green paper concludes by pleading that "the people of this country" should take "a political decision" about the resources to be devoted to higher education. □

SFC defies Congress

Washington

JUST weeks before its own demise, the Synthetic Fuels Corporation (SFC) has given a new lease on life to the Union Oil Shale Project in Parachute Creek, Colorado.

In its final scheduled meeting, the SFC board signed a contract for \$327 million in loan guarantees for the Parachute Creek project. The contract must still be approved by the Treasury Department before the funds will be released.

Congress voted at the end of last year to terminate SFC, and specifically prohibited it from spending any more money (see *Nature* 319, 89; 1986). SFC, however, unilaterally decided that the loan deal was not a new expenditure, but instead a formalization of a part of a larger price support agreement reached last October.

Opponents of the synthetic fuels programme are incensed by this latest move, but they admit that if the Treasury Department approves SFC's action, the government will probably be stuck with the obligation.

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