US state universities face massive cuts

- Recession brings layoffs, programme closures
- Long-term effect on research still unclear

Washington

A RASH of state budget crises is undermining a decade of US academic growth, as more than half of the university systems in the 50 states now face serious cutbacks and deficits.

Over the past few months, 26 state university systems have been forced to cut their budgets for the 1991 fiscal year — money that had already been committed to salaries and current programmes. Next year, matters look even worse. At least eight state governments are planning to cut their university systems below this year's level — as much as 20 per cent below, in the case of the University of Massachusetts system. Another 16 states do not expect to keep up with inflation in their higher education funding, even in the face of larger numbers of students entering the university systems.

Two years ago, state universities were riding on the crest of a wave of increased enrolment, new programmes and construction that came with the academic boom years of the 1980s, a period in which the state university systems grew on average by 35 per cent.

In 1989, more than three-quarters of all US higher education students attended state colleges and universities.

But then the recession struck, leaving many universities back at 1980s-level funding despite increased enrolments and classes. Most systems have responded by cutting administrative and support staff, postponing construction and equipment purchases, raising tuition and student fees, delaying salary increases, offering early retirement to tenured faculty and eliminating some departments and courses.

It is hard to know what effect the current crisis will have on long-term academic quality. Most university research programmes are supported on federal grants and are largely sheltered from the fiscal storm. Of the programmes that are being cut, many are in fringe or shrinking fields, such as home economics or traditional agriculture. In times of plenty, universities protect such programmes to avoid faculty and student protest. But in lean times, when the need is clear, it is easier to make tough decisions without triggering student demonstrations.

If restructuring trims university programmes back to a lean core of key disciplines, that may not necessarily be a bad thing, despite the loss of academic diversity. "We can't be all things to all people anymore," says Donald Langenberg, chancellor of the University of Maryland. "We've got to focus on what we can do best. Now we can make the cuts we should have made all along."

Like universities elsewhere across the country, University of Maryland officials are planning to eliminate faculty and staff positions, close programmes and departments, and increase class sizes. A 'strategic redeployment' is expected to eliminate two colleges — Human Ecology (what used to be known as Home Economics) and Library & Information Service — and eight other programmes, including nuclear engineering and hearing and speech sciences.

University associations blame the trouble on the nation's general economic malaise, coupled with the Reagan Administration's eight-year policy of transferring responsibility for federal social programmes to the states. Just one of those transferred programmes — Medicaid, health-care support for the poor — will cost the states some \$67,000 million in 1995, more than twice what they spent last year. Facing political pressure against increased taxes, the states were forced to dip into general funds, out of which the university systems are funded.

"Higher education is a big piece of the pie and it's discretionary. That makes it easy to cut," says University of Maryland spokesman John Lippencott. Maryland's higher education budget consumes 10 per cent of the total state budget — a tempting target, and one that did not go unnoticed. Last month, Maryland state legislators cut \$67 million — 12 per cent — from the state university budget.

Cuts at other state university systems include:

■ **California:** In the California State University system, which faces a \$402 million cut from its 1992 request, officials are planning a 20 per cent student fee increase and layoffs of 864 staff, instructors and part-time faculty. They intend to lose 420 faculty positions by offering early retirement. Chancellor Ellis McCune told the state assembly that

in his 30 years within the CSU system, "I have never seen a budget that promises to be as devastating."

Legislators have cut \$295 million from the 1992 request of the University of California system. In response, UC officials are planning to cut 1,000 staff and defer faculty salary increases for six months. They expect to reduce enrolment by 5,500 students, resulting in the elimination of 360 faculty, 100 teaching assistants and 300 support staff. Officials also plan to cut \$20 million worth of programmes that are yet to be named. A one-time 'Golden Handshake' early-retirement offer earlier this year was accepted by 3,000 staff, about half of those eligible.

■ **Massachusetts:** The University of Massachusetts system faces a \$115 million cut from its 1992 request. Governor William Weld plans to close as many as five colleges, eliminate 1,000 faculty positions and increase tuition by one-third. The university plans to kill its Community Health Education Program and part of its School of Education. Spokeswoman Kay Scanlan says, "Before the legislature started on the new budget, we had asked all our departments to turn in budgets reflecting a 7 per cent decrease from last year. Now we don't even know what to ask for. Forget keeping up with inflation."

■ **New York:** The State University of New York (SUNY) system request for 1992 has been cut by \$60 million, forcing a 30 per cent increase in tuition fees and 2,300 personnel cuts. At the City University of New York (CUNY) system, a \$92 million cut has resulted in doubled student fees and class closures at six of 21 campuses. CUNY may lose 810 faculty and staff positions at a time when enrolment is up 15 per cent. W. Ann Reynolds, chancellor of CUNY described the predicament as 'the toughest fiscal situation since the late 1970s.'

■ **New Jersey:** State universities have weathered \$72.5 million in cuts over the past three years. Rutgers University plans to cut programmes, 200 staff and 160 teaching positions to make up its largest ever \$38 million reduction this year. The New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, located at Rutgers, will lose \$6.6 million.

■ **Oregon:** A state-wide property tax cut has meant an \$86 million loss to the university system in an otherwise healthy Oregon economic climate. The reduction will mean the elimination of 700 faculty and staff positions and some \$50 million in programme cuts.

Portland State's Health and Human Performance School will be closed and its Centre for Public Health Studies is to be absorbed by another department. The University of Oregon will close its College of Human Development and Performance, and mathematics, English, science and speech teacher education programmes.

■ **Virginia:** The University of Virginia system, which faces a \$46 million cut, intends to let attrition eliminate 153 faculty jobs, and to impose a 2 per cent salary cut on all remaining faculty.

Christopher Anderson