

NATURE

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SELECTION FOR THE UNIVERSITIES

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ONE of the outstanding features of the recent report of the University Grants Committee was its concern that in the expansion of the universities of Britain, academic standards should be maintained or even improved, and that with the increased numbers of university graduates there should be no sacrifice in quality. This implies a greatly increased supply of freshmen of high quality; although there is little direct evidence on this point, there is no doubt that the schools could supply students well in excess of the present capacity of the universities.

This position is due in part to the numbers of older students in the universities whose training has been interrupted by national service. More than a third of the students at present in the universities of Britain are in receipt of grants under the Further Education and Training Scheme, or a total of more than 28,000 out of 77,000. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that, when this proportion of ex-servicemen diminishes, all the places will be available for younger undergraduates. The University Grants Committee considers that a limit should be put to the present overcrowding and consequent stress and strain, and its report implies that building up again even to the present numbers, still less the completion of the recommended expansion, should wait upon the recruitment and training of university staff and the physical expansion which will permit a normal university life and the maintenance of academic standards.

Although the Working Party on University Awards appointed by the Minister of Education in April 1948 was instructed to take account of the termination of the Further Education and Training Scheme, as well as of the increased numbers at the universities, and the probable abolition of the four-year grants for intending teachers, its report* makes surprisingly little reference to this question of quality and the maintenance of standards. Its recommendations will indeed, if accepted, sweep away many anomalies and irritations in the present system of awarding State and local scholarships. It is recognized that with the increased number of scholarships, it is unlikely that, as in the past up to 1947, State scholars will all be able to go to the universities of their choice; but the majority of the 'working party' considers they should be allowed to hold their scholarships at any university to which they may gain entry. The fundamental problem, however, is not the distribution of State scholars but the selection of students as a whole for admission to individual universities; and while the 'working party' advances a proposal for a university clearing house, on which Dr. W. W. Grave has reservations, it suggests that this larger question requires careful study.

The recommendations for raising the income-level above which a parent has to pay the whole of a State scholar's expenses, namely, from £1,500 to £2,000, and

* Ministry of Education. University Awards: the Report of the Working Party on University Awards appointed by the Minister of Education in April 1948. Pp. iv+26. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1948.) 9d. net.

for increased maintenance grants and allowance, will ease a 'means test' which at present bears heavily on middle-class families. The clarifying of the principles on which State awards are based should encourage the adoption of similar principles for local awards, and disarm some criticism of the continued predominance of the county awards. The abolition within the next three years of four-year grants to intending teachers is also recommended, in favour of provision for the degree course through the normal scholarship channels and continued finance of the students in the professional year by the Ministry.

The wider implications of these recommendations, however, need to be considered much more fully. In the first place, since the local authorities are urged "to extend their arrangements to include all eligible students accepted and recommended by universities who have reached the advanced standard in two subjects in the examination for the General Certificate of Education", all financial barriers to university education are in effect down. As the 'working party' itself puts it, to-day "Reasonable opportunity exists for the ablest students to reach the university irrespective of means". With the removal of anomalies and of limitations on those opportunities as recommended in this report, it is imperative that further thought should be given to the numerical aspect, the financial cost to the State and the question of selection.

It is with this last aspect that the universities are most vitally concerned, and although the 'working party' places squarely on the universities the responsibility for recommending awards both of open and of local scholarships—that is, of selection—it scarcely seems aware, except for Dr. Grave's dissenting note, of the administrative and other implications. The universities were inadequately represented on the 'working party'; and Dr. Grave himself, in emphasizing the speculative character of the estimated figure of 5,000 given in the report for the number of places which will continue for the present to be filled by students who do not need or do not qualify for awards from public funds, suggests that the university authorities should have been consulted before this forecast was published. The basis of this estimate is the assumption that the annual intake of students by the universities will continue at a level of 18,000 as against 12,000 before the War, and that of this total at least 4,000 will be suitable candidates for open or State awards. In normal times, a further 2,000 will consist of overseas students or others who are not eligible for awards from public funds. Assuming further the discontinuance of the four-year grants for intending teachers in accordance with its own recommendations, the 'working party' suggests a minimum of some 7,000 awards to be made through local education authorities. It is this figure which is challenged by Dr. Grave, who is clearly anxious that the pressing need for university graduates will not result in a lowering of standards for admission. As he rightly observes, once standards are lowered it is very difficult indeed to restore them.

The University Grants Committee, from its recent report, is clearly fully alive to this danger, and it is

to be hoped that the Minister of Education will consult the universities very fully and satisfy himself and the universities that conditions detrimental to the maintenance of academic standards are not prolonged or even made permanent by the premature adoption of a scale of awards too high for present conditions. The University Grants Committee, moreover, has the backing of the Nuffield College statement, and both bodies are far more representative of university opinion in Britain than the 'working party', only three of whose seventeen members came from the universities. If the university authorities, in the present circumstances, are unable to recommend for awards as many candidates as the report contemplates, they will have too much informed opinion behind them fairly to be accused of placing unjustifiable obstacles in the way of deserving students.

It is to be hoped, therefore, that the Minister of Education will give his support first to the proposals for the physical expansion of the universities and the provision of staff and buildings on a scale which will put a speedy term to the present overcrowding, and he can well decide that the number of public awards for 1951 shall be rather lower than the 'working party' suggests without denying a chance to anyone of real ability. In the debate in the House of Commons on December 17, the Minister of Education, while making it clear that the report had not yet been accepted, indicated that it might be concluded that the earmarking of students for the teaching profession before they entered a university would be discontinued and that, along with the considerations advanced in the debate itself, he would take full account of the representations which might come to him from the universities.

The fact that, as Mr. Tomlinson disclosed, awards are still being made under the Further Education and Training Scheme at the rate of 400 a week to students who were called up before September 30, 1947, may postpone the need for decision for a little while; but it is well to be quite clear as to what is involved in the general agreement that no one should be barred by poverty alone from a university education. As the University Grants Committee points out in its report, when the great majority of students are subsidized, it may not be possible to stop short, subject to a means test, of subsidizing all; and in spite of the difficulty of defining what is meant by "benefit of a university education", it will be necessary to face an entirely new problem of selection.

The University Grants Committee starts with the assumption that the universities must not be deprived of effective choice of their own entrants, and in this it is clearly supported by the 'working party'. The Committee also recognizes that it is desirable to exclude one type of student whom the possession of means once enabled to secure admittance—the riotously living passman, sometimes of athletic promise, on whom the university as an agency of culture made small dent. There is equally the problem of identifying at the stage of entrance to the university the other type of student, who gains much from the university and whose usefulness to

the world is much enhanced by his stay there although he is not of outstanding intellectual ability. Even if, as the University Grants Committee appears disposed to agree, the removal of certain obstacles to access to the universities has eliminated also a measure of selection and lowered the average quality, the 'working party' may well be right in holding that only the adoption of its own recommendations regarding local scholarships will avoid a serious shortage of graduates for the various professions.

As to the basis of selection, the University Grants Committee merely observes that this is an unsolved problem to which the universities must now address themselves. Examination by itself will not suffice, nor will intelligence tests contribute much. Selection by interview and on the basis of reports from schools has the advantage of elasticity, but is open to the suspicion that the scales may be weighted unduly in favour of the socially eligible candidate of athletic prowess and pleasant manner and address. The 'working party' agrees that, for a considerable body of students of good academic capacity, school examinations by themselves cannot be a reliable test of ability. It suggests that the university should consider applications mainly on the grounds of the ability, attainments and inclinations of the applicants, their personality and character and the degree of competition from the other applicants. It believes, however, that more varied methods of selection are needed, and considers that the university authorities should be at liberty to interview a candidate and to apply for a suitable confidential report from the school.

Nor is this all. One other type of applicant at least, namely, those who, having left school at about fifteen and pursued their general education by part-time study, may prove to be well qualified for a university course. The 'working party' proposes that a certain number of such students should be selected on the ground of their record and intentions, supplemented by an appropriate written examination, and that the applicants should pass through a selection procedure similar in principle to that used by the Civil Service Selection Board. The final decision should rest not with the testing board but with a final selection board, constituted by the Ministry of Education, and on which the universities would be represented. This scheme would obviously remove the disadvantage at which such part-time students are placed in the ordinary written examination, and the 'working party' wisely suggests that the scheme should be tried at first on a very small scale. Dr. Grave objects to universities being asked to accept the recommendations of any final selection board, apparently basing his criticism on the Ninth Report from the Select Committee on Estimates (Session 1947-48), which discussed the Civil Service Selection Board (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 203, 205; 1948. 2s. net).

The selection of university students was one of the points made in the Fabian Society report, "Universities and the Future", in October 1947 (London: Fabian Publications, Ltd. Fabian Research Series,

No. 120, pp. 33. 1s. net). Discussing the question, "Who Shall Graduate?", it is emphasized that a comprehensive scholarship system is also essential to ensure that, whether the universities expand or not, they recruit the best possible material and draw fully upon the country's reserve of talent. The report accepts more readily than the University Grants Committee the opinion of the Barlow Report that there is an ample reserve of intelligence in Britain to allow both doubling university numbers and at the same time raising academic standards. No opinion appeared to be expressed on this point at the discussion in Section L (Education) of the British Association meeting at Brighton on "Selection at the University Level" (see *Nature*, October 16, p. 626); but successive speakers recognized the difficulty of finding a solution for the problem, and also the need for an experimental approach.

This, however, is not all. Whatever method of selection may be devised, its adoption by the universities of Britain will involve heavy administrative responsibilities with which many of them are at present ill-staffed to cope. No doubt the University Grants Committee was not unmindful of this aspect in its observations on administration; but the magnitude of those responsibilities may well be a further reason for proceeding with caution. The points at issue, in fact, are essentially those of method and of timing, and the whole trend of the Minister of Education's remarks in the recent debate on university awards suggests that the recommendations of the 'working party' will not be implemented hastily or without due forethought and proper consultation of the universities, the weak representation of which on the 'working party' has rather diminished the weight of its recommendations. If that course is adopted, we should simultaneously be on the way to the thorough understanding between the universities and the schools which Mr. C. R. Morris rightly stressed at Brighton, and which Dr. J. F. Mountford had previously urged at the Home Universities Conference in September 1947.

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A FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF BOTANY

Botanik der Gegenwart und Vorzeit in kultur-historischer Entwicklung

Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der abendländischen Völker. Von Karl F. W. Jessen. (Pallas, Vol. 1.) Pp. xxii + 496. (Waltham, Mass.: Chronica Botanica Co.; London: Wm. Dawson and Sons, Ltd., 1948.) 6 dollars.

THIS volume is the first of a series of classical scientific works which the Chronica Botanica Company aims at bringing into fresh circulation. Jessen's book appeared in 1864, eleven years before the publication of the well-known "History of Botany" by Sachs; but, while a copy of the original or of the English translation of the latter is to be found in every botanical library, Jessen's book will be known to very few in Britain. In actual fact the two books supplement one another to a very con-