

CHANGE FOR BEST DEFENCE

THERE will be the widest welcome for the news, reported on page 443, that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors is hoping to become a more effective instrument for defining and defending the common interests of British universities. It is now clear that the years immediately ahead will be critical for the universities and for British higher education as a whole. Already the pressure on funds is acute. There are also signs that external agencies, and particularly the Government, are anxious to press more vigorously than in the past their legitimate interests in the way the system functions. The implicit demand that the universities should somehow increase their direct contribution to the health of British industry is only one example of the challenges which lie ahead. If the universities are not equipped to make policy in concert, there is a real danger that damage will be done. One of the more obvious hazards is that in the period of rapid change which lies ahead, the universities will be pushed in ill-chosen directions by arbitrary combinations of external events. Another is that, in isolation, universities will be tempted to believe that the only response to pressure from outside is obdurate resistance. That would be a great misfortune, for though the universities are much in need of a collective defence, the preservation of the existing scheme of things serves nobody's interest.

The proposals which the Vice-Chancellors' Committee has now put to the universities are commendable because they are a framework within which it will be possible to regain the initiative for change. It is particularly sensible that first attention should be given to creating machinery for a continuing analysis of university problems. The weakness of the universities in recent years has been their dependence on the outside world for guidance and direction. It took a royal commission to make a clear statement of how the demand for places at the universities is linked with the increasing population of senior pupils in secondary schools. There is no reason why the universities collectively should not have hit on this truth for themselves, and why they should not have been the first to bring it to public attention. Indeed, if the universities had been properly organized, they would have been able to design a better scheme for increasing the university population than the Robbins Commission made public, if only because they would have been better placed to make perceptive judgments about the existing state of affairs. Much the same is true of the kinds of statements about university policy now being made by the Council for Scientific Policy and by the research councils.

This kind of task should be high on the list of things to be done if the Committee of Vice-Chancellors gets its stronger administrative machinery. But there is also a host of more mundane but no less important

problems to be tackled. Applying cost-benefit yardsticks to various parts of the university system will save money, improve facilities and also convince the outside world that the system is being run professionally. The Brynmor Jones report on teaching methods, sponsored by the University Grants Committee, has served principally to show that British universities have hardly begun to think of the ways in which new techniques can help in teaching. Questions of the grouping of universities into larger units are bound to crop up, if only because of the need to make the best use of specialists. And what about objective testing, qualifications for entry, relations with other institutions of higher education, and joint appointments with industry and the Civil Service? There is no end to the list of questions which should be tackled urgently. The sooner the new secretariat gets to work, the better.

To recite a list of problems to be solved is not, of course, a guarantee that solutions will be forthcoming, and it would be wrong to minimize the difficulties that lie ahead. The most immediately daunting problem is that of finding the people to do the work. On the face of things, the problem looks like that of duplicating the growing machinery of the University Grants Committee, but reality may be simpler than that. The universities, after all, are well stocked with talent, not all of it over-employed. It would be entirely sensible if the Committee of Vice-Chancellors were to rely on secondment from the universities for the nucleus of the staff it needs, and that would have the advantage of bringing the universities more intimately up against their own responsibility not merely for the conduct but for the objectives of their affairs. Relations with the University Grants Committee are potentially a difficulty, although the U.G.C. would probably be relieved not to have to combine its defence of this public purse and its vestigial role as the defender of university freedom. The biggest stumbling block is probably the need that individual universities and university departments should sink some of their autonomy in the machinery for collective decision making. This is a small sacrifice to make in a good cause. Indeed, there is a case for saying that it would be no sacrifice at all, but a real gain, if decisions within and about universities were to be made more openly and more collectively. A great many of the marks of individuality which universities hold dear often seem to the outside world like wayward eccentricity.

EUROPEAN SCIENCE

THE Secretary of State for Education and Science did well to affirm to a European gathering at Manchester on October 19 that the British Government is in