

Museums cost Money

University museums in Britain are starved of funds and do not cater for the general public.

MAY the current unrest among students be explained by lack of contact with the past? This was one of the points raised by Lord Rosse, chairman of the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, when introducing the report *Universities and Museums* (HMSO) recently. He also said that it was only by the study of past achievements that we could go forward and get the best out of technology today. But the report makes clear that funds for university museums in Britain are hopelessly inadequate and that these museums will be unable even to fulfil much more modest roles until more is spent on providing space and staff to run them.

The commission has been asked by the Treasury to report on the universities in relation to their own and other museums. The University Grants Committee, which indirectly provides funds for university museums, has helped. Of the fifteen museums which are or might be used by the general public as well as by a university, every one needs more staff, more space or more money. A university museum, like any other, has two basic and sometimes conflicting functions: to preserve material and to make it available for study. The university museum has the special responsibility of making its collection available for undergraduate teaching, but, as the report says, that is no excuse for not catering for the general public as well. The report says that many university museums, including some of the greatest collections like those in the natural history and geology museums at Oxford and Cambridge, are too exclusively pre-occupied with undergraduate teaching. They have remained in the part-time charge of lecturers and professors, who tend to regard them as another chore. As a result, many museums have completely inadequate displays. In some, the material is actually deteriorating and the catalogues—which are essential to general public and scholars alike—are unlikely ever to be brought up to date. The commission urges the appointment of full-time trained curators with adequate staff and suitable buildings so that the collections can be preserved, displayed and catalogued. It is no use hoping that a member of the teaching staff of a university will provide attractive displays, properly labelled and protected, for the general public or even for his undergraduates.

But if the universities are to spend more on their museums, where is the money to come from? Funds for university museums are allocated from the general income of the universities. The commission considers that the University Grants Committee is a satisfactory administrative channel for the government financing of university museums but, having been warned that it would be futile to recommend that the UGC should earmark part of its normal grants for museums, the commission is left with little alternative but to urge individual universities to give greater priority to their museums when they parcel out their funds. The commission makes up for its lack of funds with exhortation.

The report maintains that, in the long run, the service university museums could and should provide to

scholarship and culture now and in the future is equally as important as their immediate teaching or research programmes. It says that universities should stop starving the museums and provide staff and space to ensure conservation and cataloguing. The museums should also be made available to a wider public, and the report recommends that the universities and local authorities put their heads together about this, following the lead of Manchester. The university museum at Manchester has been open to the public since 1895, when three city representatives were appointed to the museum committee. Last year the links between the museum and the city were strengthened when the city's representation on the committee was increased to eight and the Manchester City Corporation matched pound for pound the money provided from the University General Fund—in the year beginning in July 1966 each gave £25,833. This is just the sort of co-operation between local authorities and university museums which the Standing Commission is advocating.

The museum plays an important part in the life of the city as well as of the university. It mounts special exhibitions of local interest—last year, for example, there was an exhibition "Roman Manchester" and an exhibition to mark the bicentenary of John Dalton, a confirmed Mancunian. It also provides lecture series, and twenty school classes, chiefly from secondary modern and primary schools, attend the special school service department each week. Indeed, so many schools wanted to visit the museum in 1966-67 that, during the summer term, one afternoon each week was set aside for school visits. The increasing attendance figures in the latest annual report of the museum, covering July 1966-67, attest to its growing popularity with the general public. Attendances have steadily risen over the past ten years and last year, with a 25 per cent increase, they reached the record level of 123,396. The total attendance was about 180,000. The local authorities in other areas might be more inclined to help finance and administer the museums if they showed signs of becoming centres for general education. The commission also recommends that the grant-in-aid of purchases which is administered in England and Wales by the Victoria and Albert Museum and in Scotland by the Royal Scottish Museum be doubled to £200,000 and £16,000 respectively. At the present levels, the money available is pitifully inadequate and is always exhausted in the first six months of the year.

There has never been a regular course in Britain for training museum curators—characteristically it has always been a matter of learning by experience—but in 1966 the University of Leicester and the city museum began a one year postgraduate course in museum studies. An earlier recommendation of the commission, for grants to the Museum Association to provide a comprehensive training scheme, was rejected by the Government on the grounds that museum curators should be trained at universities: so in the present report it retaliates by calling for the encouragement and expansion of programmes like that at Leicester.