

New Role for the AEA

THE United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority at last shows signs of shedding some of its load. Indeed, the publication last week of its fourteenth annual report (HMSO, 13s) may mark a turning point for the organization which has for so long been the major prop of British nuclear power. Although there will inevitably be regret in the authority at the way things seem to be heading, what matters most is that its experience and talent be put to best use in the new industrial framework which is emerging. Happily, the authority seems to be cooperating fully and enthusiastically in putting together the new structure.

So far, only one of the two new nuclear companies has been announced. It is made up of English Electric (now part of GEC), Babcock and Wilcox, Taylor Woodrow, the IRC and the Atomic Energy Authority. Already the company has reaped a reward for being first off the mark. For one thing, the AEA has handed over to Babcock English Electric the construction of the 250 MW prototype fast reactor at Dounreay. This means that by 1971, when the PFR is complete, the new company will be the only one in the world to have built a fast reactor. The other new company will, of course, be licensed to build the fast reactor, but without the industrial experience it is likely to find itself at a disadvantage. Babcock English Electric has also been able to snap up three officials from the AEA for its board of directors—Mr J. C. C. Stewart, member for reactors, Mr N. L. Franklin and Mr H. V. Disney. This is at least one more than the AEA could have expected from its share of the equity, and one explanation is that Mr Stewart and Mr Disney will both leave the AEA soon and join the company full time. It has also been announced that the new company has won the contract to build the nuclear power station at Hartlepoons for the Central Electricity Generating Board, so it is off to a very good start.

Within the next week or so, it is expected that the details of the organization of the second company will be announced. Again the AEA can be expected to hold a shareholding, though, as in the first company, it will be doing so only as an interim measure until the nuclear fuel company is formed. Unfortunately, it seems likely that it will take several years to set up the fuel company; legislation will not be introduced before the 1969–70 session of Parliament, which implies that the fuel company will not be set up until late in 1970.

By then, it is likely that the AEA will have contracted still further. The authority confirmed this week that it is investigating the possibility of closing the Wantage laboratory and transferring its work to Harwell, although it is stressed that so far no firm decision has been made. Wantage is where the AEA has concentrated most of its commercial work on isotopes, and the laboratory in fact houses the Isotope Research Division of AERE Harwell. By moving the staff at Wantage (which numbers 180) to Harwell, some

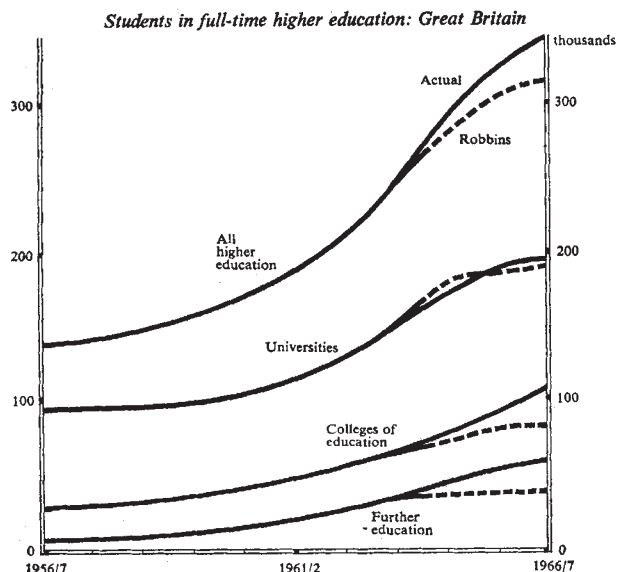
economies could certainly be made, and the move would also have the benefit of concentrating the authority's work for the support of industry in one laboratory. One of the major projects at Wantage has been the Package Irradiation Plant, used for the sterilization of food and medical instruments.

The authority has used the annual report to answer the critics who claim that the development of the advanced gas cooled reactor has been too expensive. An economic benefit analysis carried out by the authority shows that the £110 million spent on the AGR will produce a benefit of some £600–700 million, if very conservative ground rules are accepted. The analysis assumes an 80 per cent load factor, 25 year life, and fossil fuel costs well below current levels. Even if the cost of fossil fuels falls as low as 3d a therm, the benefit of the AGR programme would be £350–400 million. For the further development of reactor systems, the analysis concludes that a benefit of some £800 million is to be expected.

EDUCATION

Battle of the Bulge

DURING the five years that have elapsed since the Robbins report was hailed as the first overall plan for higher education in this country, it has become common knowledge that the committee underestimated the likely future output of "qualified school leavers". Thus it was forecast that the proportion of seventeen year olds with two A-levels would rise from 6.9 per cent in 1961 to 8.4 per cent in 1966, whereas it actually rose to 9.6 per cent. In other words, by 1966 the number of leavers with these qualifications was already 16.5 per cent higher than the forecast, and by 1971–72 this discrepancy can be expected to have increased



Number of students in full-time higher education in Great Britain. (Reproduced from "The Impact of Robbins" in *Higher Education Review*, Cornmarket Press Ltd).