

Haslegrave under Fire

TECHNICAL colleges are seldom in the public eye. Even the debate about the far-reaching proposals of the Haslegrave Committee on technician education has failed to take any of the headlines away from the universities and secondary schools, despite the fact that the proposals have roused considerable controversy in further education circles. But at least Dr Haslegrave's report, which was published last December (see *Nature*, 224, 1143; 1970), seems to have attracted the interest of those directly concerned, because when the Department of Education and Science asked some fifty organizations for their comments it received at least eighty replies.

Few would deny that the present pattern of technician courses is clumsy and stands in need of overhaul. There are about twenty-five separate bodies that organize courses for technicians and, as a consequence of the Industrial Training Act, some thirty training boards, each with its own views on education and training, have added further complications. What the committee has proposed is that two education councils should be set up to develop a unified pattern of courses. A Technician Education Council would be responsible for the technical side, while a Business Education Council would look after the provision of courses for business and office studies. The committee has also suggested that the City and Guilds of the London Institute should provide the administrative backing for both councils, partly because it is the best organization to do the job, and partly to help coordinate the activities of the two councils. In addition, the Higher National Diploma should be phased out and be replaced by a Higher Technician Diploma.

It seems that the most severe criticisms of Dr Haslegrave's proposals have come from industry. The Confederation of British Industry, in its memorandum to the DES, found little in the report with which it could agree, and emphasized the need for flexibility in the arrangements for technician education. In particular, the CBI believes that the two sectors of business and technical education should be brought under the control of a single council responsible for overall policy, while separate divisions should deal with each of the sectors. The Royal Society of Arts and the London Chamber of Commerce should have some say in the arrangements for business education. The CBI criticized the suggestion of the Haslegrave report that the Technician Education Council should draw two thirds of its members from education circles; industrial and educational interests should be equally represented to ensure that technician education and technician training should complement each other. In addition, the CBI suggests that schools should be included in the educational representation on the councils, because their function in relation to the availability and suitability of trainee technicians will be more important when the school leaving age is raised.

As far as the educational aspects of the proposals are concerned, the CBI suggests that "the alternatives of the more theoretical (national certificate and diploma) and the more practical (City and Guilds) course biases

under the present system have served industry well. It is hoped that this would continue under the arrangements recommended". The CBI is also anxious that there should be facilities for transfer between courses and that the phasing out of existing courses should be done very gradually. In any case, courses should only be withdrawn if new arrangements include adequate provision for design students.

The Association of Teachers in Technical Institutions, on the other hand, has found most of the report to its liking. Its memorandum to the DES is heavy with praise for many of the proposals, and in fact almost the only point of reserve concerns the workings of the Technician Education Council and the Business Education Council. The ATTI's chief worry is that there will be too little coordination between the councils; to prevent this, a standing consultative committee should be set up with wide terms of reference. This committee, which might be called the Further Education Council, should include members of both the Technician and Business Education Councils, and it would take an overall view of the whole further education sector. The ATTI has, of course, endorsed the suggestion that membership of the councils should be weighted in favour of educational interests.

The City and Guilds, which would play a starring part in the proposed arrangements, has been surprisingly reticent in its comments. It complains of vagueness in the Haslegrave recommendations and that "some of the proposals appear to be inconsistent with one another", but it is prepared to wait and see whether the Department of Education and Science accepts the proposals in principle before it argues about the finer details. The Director-General of the City and Guilds, Mr C. R. English, said recently that the City and Guilds "is likely to welcome the report in principle, with reservations on certain details". One aspect which seems to be giving some concern is that many foreign students at present take City and Guilds qualifications, and if these are replaced by other examinations, the international reputation of British technician qualifications could suffer.

The Council of Engineering Institutions also finds itself in broad agreement with the proposals, although with some reservations. For one thing, it joins the CBI in expressing doubts about the membership of the Technician Education Council, because it believes that industry would be under represented, a situation which would not foster liaison between industry and the colleges. The council is also doubtful about the proposal that the hours devoted to technical study for the Higher Technician Diploma should be 300 less than are needed to attain the Higher National Diploma; such a change seems likely to reduce standards.

It seems, in any case, that few changes will be made in the pattern of courses for technicians, at least in the next few years. The Department of Education and Science is unlikely to give its verdict on the proposals until early next year, and the two councils would not be set up until the autumn of 1971. It will then take about a year to work out a complete pattern of courses, and it will therefore be at least September 1973 before any new courses come into being.