

OLD WORLD

HIGHER EDUCATION

Recipe for Change

by our Education Correspondent

A GROUP of individuals from higher education, government and industry has put forward a set of suggestions for revamping higher education which are far reaching and yet retain some of the flavour of the traditional British university system. Called the Higher Education Policy Group, and convened by Professor W. R. Niblett of the University of London Institute of Education, the group has been discussing the future development of higher education in Britain for the past 18 months. The suggestions offered, although not spelled out in detail, include a flexible system which would enable a student to qualify for a degree in two years, or an honours degree in three, a unified admissions procedure for all institutions of higher education, ease of transfer between institutions and more autonomy for the public sector.

This statement (available from the University of London Institute of Education, 1s 6d) is the latest in a series of recent reports and suggestions for revamping higher education, all of which have sprung from acknowledgment of the fact that the population of the universities is likely to grow faster than their finances, and some way of expanding higher education within strict financial limits must therefore be found. But the Higher Education Policy Group also believes that there are strong educational arguments for changing the present pattern of courses and the administrative structure of higher education. The group is also the first to admit that it offers no panacea for the problems.

The group's chief suggestion is that although an honours degree should be awarded only on completion of three years full-time study or its part-time equivalent, students should be able to alternate between full-time and part-time study. And the policy group also floats the idea that students should be able, at their own choice, to leave higher education after two years, taking with them a degree. This implies that universities should offer part-time courses, and that students should be able to transfer from one institution to another. The policy group is therefore aiming for a unitary system of higher education, at least as far as courses are concerned.

A unified admissions procedure for all institutions of higher education and a system of course credits are necessary corollaries to such a suggestion. Although the policy group discusses the first in some detail, it gives only passing reference to the second. It suggests that a first

step in rationalizing admissions systems would be for the polytechnics and other similar institutions to agree on a single common application form, and for the separate admissions procedures for universities and colleges of education to be merged. Unless some common admissions procedure along these lines is accepted, the present system, in which students are forced to choose between a university or some other establishment, will continue to ensure that polytechnics attract applications chiefly from students unable to gain admission to the universities.

Recognizing that there will be a considerable diversity of institutions, at least for the next ten years, the Higher Education Policy Group suggests that administrative differences should not be allowed to distort their underlying community of purpose. The total cost of teaching a first degree student on a given type of course in a given subject should, for example, be broadly similar throughout the whole sector, and there should be more sharing of expensive academic equipment between neighbouring institutions. The policy group warns that unless institutions of higher education take active steps to achieve closer coordination, "they are likely to have a less acceptable form of rationalization imposed upon them".

As far as the public sector itself is concerned, the policy group believes that some local authority representation in the control of finances for the polytechnics is desirable, but the group suggests that a central body should be established at national level for approving capital expenditure on higher education. The Department of Education and Science should determine the overall capital expenditure on the public sector of higher education, and the new body should allocate projects within the total budget.

How would the colleges of education fit into the proposed scheme? The Higher Education Policy Group puts forward three alternative suggestions. Some of the larger colleges might develop into degree-giving institutions, offering a wide range of choices in sciences and liberal arts; others might become federated or integrated with universities or polytechnics, and the remainder might concentrate on in-service training for a variety of professions.

Will these suggestions result in much saving in unit costs? The policy group realistically suggests that only about 10 per cent of the students will opt to leave higher education after two years, and the saving in costs would therefore only be of the order of £35 million in 1981. The group also believes, however, that a reduction of about 15 per cent in the staff/student ratio in higher education as a whole should be tolerable over a ten year period of expansion, and

this would save some £60 million in 1981.

Such savings would be unlikely to satisfy those who believe that the higher education system already takes an excessive share of the gross national product, and the Higher Education Policy Group is therefore forced to suggest that a partial student loans scheme should be considered. Although the group takes pains to point out that it is in principle opposed to any financial arrangements which may act as a deterrent to entry to higher education, it suggests a scheme in which maintenance grants would continue at their present level, so that their real value would be eroded by inflation, and a student would be able to take out a loan to be paid back at a prearranged percentage of his future income. If the average sum accepted by each student were £100 a year after 1971, the policy group calculates that repayment would be about £30 million by 1981 and more than £100 million in 1991.

Even with savings of this order, however, the Higher Education Policy Group's suggestions would still entail an increasing percentage of the gross national product being devoted to higher education. It would therefore be necessary to look towards savings in research costs, and to the whole relationship between teaching and research. There is also good reason to take a look at the research establishments of the research councils to see whether there is scope for their integration with the universities. The Higher Education Policy Group has conspicuously left aside such considerations. Nevertheless, its suggestions for reshaping courses form a compromise between the radical proposals put forward by Professor Pippard and those who believe that the system should be allowed to develop much along its present lines.

The following people signed the statement: S. L. Bragg, Michael Brock, G. S. Brosan, Colin Crouch, Frederick S. Dainton, Goronwy Daniel, Bernard de Bunsen, Brian H. Flowers, R. C. Griffiths, P. D. Hall, F. R. Hornby, H. G. Judge, P. R. G. Layard, Norman Lindop, William Mansfield Cooper, A. W. Merrison, D. E. Mumford, W. R. Niblett, Beryl Paston Brown, James F. Porter, Marjorie E. Reeves, and Bryan Thwaites.

BIOLOGY TEACHING

Showing the Way

SOME far-reaching changes are on the way in the teaching of biology at British universities. This was made clear when members of the Institute of Biology met last week at the Royal Society, London, to discuss the problems they face in an age of university expansion and financial