

stricture. To compare the ways in which some of these problems may be overcome, participants took with them an impressive collection of visual aids and equipment.

Professor H. E. Street (University of Leicester) set the scene with an account of the difficulties now inherent in teaching biology in universities. The diversity of backgrounds of the students, with some lacking O-level physics and mathematics or A-level biology, will probably increase as universities expand. The task of bringing such students to the same level of knowledge is formidable, and Street said that, at Leicester, efforts so far have been fraught with difficulties. His department, for example, has tackled the problem of the lack of, or aversion to, mathematics by establishing a course known as "quantitative biology". But there is disagreement about the status of this course, about its content and about the time which should be devoted to it.

One of Street's most strongly expressed points was that students are increasingly questioning the relevance of almost everything they have to do. He emphasized that it is vital to persuade the student who intends to become a microbial geneticist that it is valuable to study the morphology of the leaf, remote as it may be from his chosen career, because it will help him to become a better biologist. For situations such as this, Street felt that interdisciplinary teaching is essential.

One outcome of the concern for problems of this sort has been the Inter-University Biology Teaching Project. Financed by a grant of £80,000 from the Nuffield Foundation, the Universities of London, Glasgow, Birmingham, Sussex and Bath have worked out various courses, making use of programmed texts, films, videotapes and other visual aids. The courses, described by Professor O. E. Lowenstein (University of Birmingham), are mostly either bridging courses, designed to make good deficiencies in knowledge, or service courses for students who wish to be introduced to a subject, not necessarily with a view to later specialization.

AGRICULTURE

Prior's Priority

ONE of the first signs of the severity with which the government regards its resolve to cut public spending came last week with the announcement by the Minister of Agriculture, Mr James Prior, that many of the services which the ministry provides for farmers are to be discontinued. These measures, which should save the department some £15 million a year, will be spread over three years and may mean that as many as 1,500

(10 per cent) Ministry of Agriculture civil servants will lose their jobs, although Mr Prior believes that much of this staff saving would come through natural wastage.

The greater part of the economies which Mr Prior proposes in his White Paper (Cmd 4564) lies in the cancellation of a number of the services to farmers which in the past have been provided free. The County Agricultural Executive Committee system will be brought to an end together with the Agricultural Marketing Facilities Committees and the local Wheat Committees. Some thirty other advisory bodies including the North Pennines Rural Development Board and the Council on Rabbits and other Land Pests will similarly be axed. The plan is that farmers who are progressive and interested in improving their farms and production should seek out the ministry's help, or alternatively obtain advice and help from private enterprises.

This represents a clear change in the government's attitude towards the farmer. Whereas in the past the advisory committees have come to the farmer, it will soon be the other way round. The farmer is being asked to show, in Mr Prior's words, "individual initiative and self-reliance". It seems clear that the cuts will strike hardest against the small and the inefficient farmer, whereas the wealthy or cooperative farmer will not suffer to the same extent.

ELECTRONICS

Siemens's UK Expansion

THE formation of an electronics division within Siemens (UK) Ltd is the latest development in the re-establishment of the well known German electrical firm in Britain after two setbacks during the world wars. A Siemens subsidiary was first founded in Britain in 1858 only 10 years after the formation of the parent company, Siemens AG, in Berlin. Siemens AG has now grown to be the largest electrical concern in Europe after Philips with sales which reached £1,400 million in 1969-70.

For 20 years after the Second World War, marketing of Siemens products in the UK was entrusted to various agencies. From 1965, however, Siemens (UK) Ltd was able to resume the firm's operations under its own name but since then the company's chief role has been that of an importer although some assembly and manufacturing work is now carried out at a factory in Cheshire. The new electronics division will be situated at Croydon, Surrey, and will market a range of Siemens products which broadly reflect manufacturing divisions within the parent company.

Parliament in Britain

Aldermaston

THE proportion of the total expenditure attributable to civil work at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, Aldermaston, has increased from 17 per cent in 1967-68 to 19 per cent in 1969-70. This information was given by Mr Nicholas Ridley, Undersecretary of State, Department of Trade and Industry, in reply to a question from Mr Albert Booth. But Mr Booth suggested that there is still an urgent need to transfer a higher proportion of research and development capacity in Britain to civil research.

In reply to a later question from Mr R. Carter, Mr Ridley announced that government support for the Aldermaston project for the application of computers to engineering is being scaled down. The need for such support is no longer apparent, he said, and the future of the project must depend on the extent of its financial support from industry. Although the project has done valuable work in the past, Mr Ridley said there is no reason why industry should not pay for it, whether the work is carried out in the public or the private sector. (Oral answers, January 18.)

Atomic Energy Authority

SIR JOHN EDEN, Minister for Industry, gave an assurance during the committee stage of the Atomic Energy Authority Bill that employees transferred from the AEA to either of the proposed companies—British Nuclear Fuels Ltd and the Radiochemical Centre Ltd—will be employed on the same conditions as they enjoyed immediately before transfer. Sir John Eden rejected, however, the suggestion from the staff of the Atomic Energy Authority that there should be a permanent link between the terms and conditions existing in the proposed companies and those existing in the Atomic Energy Authority at any time in the future. He said that after the interim period, adequate negotiating machinery would be established in the new companies. He said, however, that a temporary link between the pay scales in the new companies and in the Atomic Energy Authority would be maintained.

An amendment to the bill, moved by Mr Airey Neave, which would enable the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to set up subsidiaries of the proposed companies was withdrawn after Mr Nicholas Ridley had given an assurance that British Nuclear Fuels Ltd would be able to hold interests in other companies and to enter into any arrangements with other companies. The company can therefore set up operational subsidiaries in selected areas on its own initiative, and such a move would not be the responsibility of the Secretary of State. (Debate, January 15.)