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University research in danger

POSTGRADUATE education comes in for some very rough treatment from the House of Commons Expenditure Committee in its recent report (96-I, HMSO; £0.34). If the committee had its way the numbers of those going straight from undergraduate education to any form of postgraduate work would be cut. 'Post-experience' students, however, would be encouraged both to take vocational courses and to do research for a higher degree. Maintenance for postgraduates would include a repayable loan element but tuition fees would not be required of British students. Overseas students, on the other hand, would be expected to pay the full cost of tuition (about £1,500) except insofar as reciprocal arrangements and overseas aid schemes could be devised.

The brief given to the Education and Arts Sub-Committee of the Expenditure Committee was to examine the "financing and administration of postgraduate education". It is important to remember this brief, because the committee clearly exceeded it in venturing into discussions on the character of postgraduate education. And, having strayed from its brief, it inevitably obtained incomplete evidence.

The nine members of parliament on the committee, none apparently with any firsthand experience of the sort of postgraduate study under discussion, heard evidence from most of the bodies concerned with universities and polytechnics and from many industrialists. It also travelled to seven other countries, where its witnesses were mostly concerned with the financing of students.

The committee, unsurprisingly, discovered that there are divided opinions about the value of higher education and doctoral research. It heard that industry, in general, cares little for the PhD and prefers to recruit at the graduate level. International Computers Limited said their needs for postgraduates were "negligible". The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) described a "widespread industrial view that the system is producing a body of specialists in science and technology, the relevance and originality of whose research is often questionable". This ill-considered remark, out of place in the committee's terms of reference, epitomises the woeful relationship between industry and most university departments. Industry views PhDs as poor material, PhDs view industry as a poor place for their skills.

Having unearthed this unhappy relationship, it would have been well to call for a much fuller enquiry. The committee should have recognised the problem and faced it head on with a much greater attempt to understand the world of postgraduate learning. This was not to be; there is no indication that the committee appre-

ciated why people do postgraduate research, what is unattractive in industry for the PhD and *vice versa*. Some of its foreign travel could have included attempts to find out why industrialists elsewhere do not share this contempt for the PhD.

The half-informed committee concluded that the the solution to such problems as there obviously are is to let industry decide. Rather than question industry's miserable record in attracting and employing PhDs, the committee was content to go along with it in ripping the present system apart. "We see [postgraduate education] as specialised training for mature students who normally will have shown talent and determination well above average both in the academic and professional worlds". So the pre-experience student is to be discouraged, except from taking vocational courses.

If pre-experience study were restricted, would post-experience students grow in numbers? No doubt a demand could be created for vocational courses of up to a year. But would industry really release employees for three years to do a PhD? It does not specifically say that it would, indeed one major employer says privately that it would not. So the PhD would be a narrower qualification, dominated by those in the academic field and even less in tune with societal needs.

The government would do well to reject this poorly reasoned report, even though times are hard and relevance is the watchword. The structure of research training should not be pulled apart just because British industry and PhDs have not come to terms. What is good for the CBI may be appalling for the world of learning.

100 years ago



WE are glad to see that the *Times* has at last opened its pages to the question of the propriety of appointing a responsible Minister, whose duty it shall be to look after the interests of Science and of scientific research and education, and take charge of the scientific institutions of the country—institutions whose efficiency is at present sadly crippled from the want of a single responsible head. The whole question could not be better

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