

a department. A further problem is a shortage of reading matter. SISCON—the one-year-old Science in a Social Context project—is trying to fill this gap. A group of eight universities and one polytechnic running science studies or interdisciplinary courses have been given £50,000 by the Nuffield Foundation to produce course books which are flexible enough for a wide variety of courses. Dr W. F. Williams, the SISCON project coordinator, sees the job as essentially short term. The aim is to produce as wide a range of teaching material as possible and if within ten years this is not being supplemented and replaced by books written outside SISCON the whole idea will probably have been a failure. Dr Williams is also toying with the possibility of sending a researcher to Nigeria to gauge the need for similar publications in Africa.

And what of the courses that do not attempt to break down the traditional boundaries? Dr Edge's institute in Edinburgh provides only one quarter to one half of a student's work for one year. Dr Edge aims to give students an awareness of science—its internal behaviour and its relations with the world—without taking up so much of his students' time to prevent them from progressing to scientific research if they wish.

Professor Jevons's department in Manchester similarly offers a single unadulterated science alongside science studies. But the entire course—science and science studies—is within a single department and Professor Jevons does not aim to produce scientists ready to do research. The students only spend half their time doing science and the other half looking at science in its social, historical and economic context.

Undergraduates prefer to be taught distinct subjects rather than a homogenised baby food, said Professor Jevons. It would be a pity to break down the real outlines of the traditional subjects in order to erect the flimsy bridges between the interdisciplinary courses. Yet students want to participate and debate and learn to take decisions. Since the well-worn precepts of the physical sciences are patently unsuitable material for this style of teaching, the best solution is to teach students something else besides their science. In Professor Jevons's department this something else is science studies, which can be taught by science teachers. This part of the curriculum develops the student's critical faculties which are by necessity blunted in the acceptance of scientific truths. The student becomes more aware of the role of science in the world and perhaps even a better scientist.

A final word of warning against the excesses of interdisciplinarity. Professor Kendrew reminded the meeting

As a rest from the round of lectures and seminars, British Association members had the opportunity to look around Redpath Dorman Long (North Sea) on the Fife coast. The little village of Methil on the coal coast of Fife once boasted a thriving colliery but since the 1960s unemployment had increased and the area had begun to show the inevitable signs of industrial dereliction.

But in 1972, RDL (North Sea) set up at Methil, on the disused 136-acre colliery site, when the company was formed from a consortium of British and Italian interests. RDL, a subsidiary of British Steel, hold a 55% increase and the remaining 45% is held by three Italian companies with long experience in the design and construction of oil production platforms in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

RDL's first steel jacket, for the Auk field, was successfully placed in position on its 280 feet deep water site this summer, and RDL are now building an even bigger structure for the 480-foot deep Brent field. As the weight of the structure varies with the square of the depth of the water, this platform is twice as high and four times as heavy as the 4,000 ton Auk platform. RDL have also started work on a comparatively tiny gas production platform for the Danish Dan field.

The site at Methil could certainly cope with at least one medium and one large-sized jacket at the same time, said a company spokesman. In this RDL think they have an advantage over some of the other steel platform con-



Work returns to Methil

structors, who use the flotation tank method for building and floating out platforms and thus can build only one at a time. RDL build their platforms on dry land and then manoeuvre them onto submersible barges which carry them out to the site.

The Methil site has only 30 feet of water for floating out but this is perfectly adequate for the steel jackets which are towed out on their sides. RDL also have on offer a steel/concrete hybrid gravity platform but as yet have no takers. This design can also be built at the Methil yard and is suitable for water depths up to 600 feet, rivalling the concrete platforms.

that certain "hard" subjects such as mathematics had to be learnt young or not at all. The early molecular biologists showed that it was a positive advantage to enter a field of which you had no previous knowledge, as long as the basic mathematical ability was there. And certain subjects could very properly be picked up by the student or graduate when he felt a need for them—witness Professor Kendrew's success with crystallography. □

## Social concern

Mrs Shirley Williams, Secretary of State for Consumer Affairs, drew the attention of a British Association symposium to the difficulties that politicians find in keeping in touch with science. "When I was a minister with responsibility for science", she said, "I found that ministers with such responsibilities are not in touch with scientists". Speaking during a symposium on the British Association report on Social Concern and the Biological Sciences, Mrs Williams, a member of the work-

ing party who conceived the report, said that she had been dependent on a few and sometimes only one scientific adviser. There must be more round-table discussions such as the British Association can provide on controversial biological and medical advances, she said. Parliament badly need greater education and more information. Many of these topics are very suitable one for a free non-party vote but only amongst informed men and women, Mrs Williams concluded.

The working party has been criticised in several quarters for producing a non-report. Countering such criticisms, Professor Bodmer promised that they would now draft concrete proposals and press for these to be put into effect. The working party's life is to be prolonged by a fresh infusion of funds from the Leverhulme Trust, and in its future incarnations will widen its scope to cover other biological advances such as the genetic manipulation of bacteria, but would not venture into thorny paths such as pollution, population and behavioural control. □