



September 18, 1975

No easy way to solve universities' problems

IN 1970 the number of students entering universities in the United Kingdom to study dentistry (1,170) was a mere third of the number planning to study chemistry. The 1974 entry was somewhat different, according to the statistical supplement to the Twelfth Report of the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA). There were 3,065 prospective dentists, one and a half times the number of prospective chemists. Provisional figures for 1975 show the trend halted, but no more.

This is the most extreme example. The swing would be somewhat less if, say, medical students and physicists were compared, but the point must surely now have penetrated the consciousness of even the most optimistic or ostrich-like scientists: that a totally unplanned manpower shortage of scientists is creeping up on us.

Ironically, at the same time an equally unplanned shortage of job opportunities within universities has arisen, with the unwillingness of most universities to take on long term staff commitments during the past two years. It would be incorrect to see these two shortfalls balancing each other out and so preventing the worst from happening; only a small fraction of university entrants eventually opt for a university career. The universities are in trouble, and university science is in the most trouble of all.

It is against this depressing backdrop that the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology issues its interim report on the short-term problems of scientific research in British Universities (House of Commons Paper 504, HMSO, 65p). Nothing in the report will be a great surprise; the committee has not fallen for any one witness nor has it advanced any patent remedy of its own. Instead there is a sober assessment of the situation and some muted pleas to the Department of Education and Science and the University Grants Committee to hold the line on the balance between teaching and research in universities and to the universities to look carefully at their individual priorities.

Research in universities looks a precariously marginal activity when viewed from Whitehall. The Department of Education and Science is very dominantly a department of education. The University Grants Committee sees research and educational elements as indistinguishable when it allocates money, but reckons research only to comprise "rather more than 25%" of the totals. The research councils put less than one-third of their money into university departments by way of grants, studentships and fellowships. In every way university research is vulnerable to the stirrings of its larger administrative

bedfellows. Some of those bedfellows, such as academic salaries, not only rightly take precedence, but also may be committed for the next 10, 20 or more years.

And yet a crisis need not be a bad thing, particularly in an environment which has known nothing but growth for years. The committee itself remarks that if inflation concentrates university minds, it may be of some benefit. The opportunity to review priorities and seek the most efficient means of deploying more limited funds is one which it would be "highly regrettable" for the universities to ignore. Linked to this broad hint is a similar one that universities must review the relevance of their research activities. This statement is a bit of a compromise; there was at one time within the committee a feeling that there should be a national body—perhaps a 'de-grants committee'—to perform this function. And it is made clear that this idea is only temporarily on ice.

Can and should the universities respond to such a challenge to assess their priorities both in general and in terms of relevance? The answer is almost certainly that individually they lack the tools to do so or indeed much perception of how to assess relevance. The vice-like grip of job security so severely restricts the universities' freedom of action that opportunities for change, redeployment or tapering off in the staffing of departments is restricted, even in good times, largely to the arbitrariness of death, resignation or retirement. Certain economies are no doubt still possible by sharing of facilities and so on, but when 80% or more of the universities' general funds are committed to salaries and wages it is clear that the scope is limited if personnel levels are maintained.

Even more difficult to respond to is the challenge that universities must review relevance. First, there would certainly be sniping across the great divide between arts and sciences; is mediocre electrical engineering less or more relevant than competent Old Testament theology? Second, some of the relevancies can only be seen in a national perspective; maybe mathematical geodesy or Amharic look pretty irrelevant in a local context, but maybe there is a national need for a few graduates a year. Third, demands for relevance could lead to the sight of academics presenting unedifying inflated and misleading claims for their work rather in the way that confessions are 'volunteered' in some countries.

The committee rightly identifies the principal crisis as one of confidence in the future. A veiled threat to review relevance before the committee does it for you will hardly bolster this confidence. □