

No university without research

Gillian Boucher looks at how the Open University copes with the problem of conducting research

IT would be a forgivable mistake for anyone outside Britain's Open University to imagine that its sole function was to provide a university education by post: virtually all publicity has concentrated on its innovative and immensely popular courses. Even within the university it has sometimes been difficult to remember that there could be any aim in life beyond producing the next course unit. But the Open University's charter is utterly normal in allowing and requiring staff to undertake research, and recently, with the worst of the growing pains over, there has been a reassertion of the vital need for research to take its proper place alongside teaching.

Of course this view has always existed: most open university lecturers like research too much to forego it willingly and believe that an institution that simply packages information does not deserve to be called a university. But initially many people just did not have time for research. There are some who have gravitated towards the Open University because they get more satisfaction from teaching than from research. And there is a strong current of opinion in the university administration that says that research is a prize for the good boys who have written their courses. In some faculties there is even a feeling that science in general and scientific research in particular are expensive luxuries. But in spite of the difficulties the university has never been devoid of research.

Steven Rose and Ian Gass, professors respectively of Biology and Earth Sciences, managed to bring a nucleus of staff with them when they moved to Milton Keynes and have been gradually stepping up their activity ever since. The Department of Earth Sciences now produces more papers than any other British Earth Sciences Department except the Cambridge Department of Geophysics. The small staff (10 lecturers in the Biology Department) means that it is not feasible for everybody to work independently: intellectual companionship is only gained by joining a more or less interdisciplinary group. The obvious example is Rose's Brain Research Group, which involves five lectures and 15 others and is by far the largest research effort in the Biology Department. Another group, the Energy Group, was formed spontaneously during the preparation of a course on materials. Now the scientists, engineers, architects and economists in the group are studying

problems as various as the British gas industry and the development of a house heating system based on the same principles as the refrigerator cooling system.

Funding a problem

One of the programme's great advantages, of course, is cheapness. Funding is obviously a problem for an institution trying to grow at a time of economic crisis and government lack of sympathy with the universities. For an established group funding from the university and from outside sources is adequate if not princely. But for others there are difficulties: the university's approach is to fund a project initially but to expect it to attract outside funds to continue if it is any good; if the strings of published papers required by the SRC have not been written, the project is likely to founder.

Working conditions are not very comfortable and one of the problems in creating a stimulating academic environment is that people tend to spend a lot of their time at home writing course units. The permanent science building originally scheduled for 1974 will be ready in 1977 at the earliest and even this will not hold all staff: the biophysics and other groups temporarily housed in Oxford will stay there for at least another five years. That is not an unmitigated disaster—among the charms that Oxford possesses and Milton Keynes lacks are first-rate libraries and the ease with which temporary self-funded American

researchers may be attracted.

The Open University has always had research students—both internal students at Milton Keynes and Oxford and external students for whom the university finds an external supervisor near home. Many external students are technicians or hospital scientists and most of course have access to the equipment they need. Trying to do a PhD and a job at the same time sometimes causes insuperable problems: in many areas knowledge is increasing almost too fast for a part-time researcher to keep up, let alone make his own contribution.

At present higher degree students with Open University first degrees are rare, simply because so few Open University graduates have yet been produced. When they do start demanding higher degrees in large numbers there will be difficulties. The open university student, though probably more resourceful than the average British undergraduate, is not used to reading much outside his course text or doing much practical work. In many ways the Open University degree is closer to the American than to the conventional British one. American PhD students usually spend a couple of years doing course work before beginning research but the Open University offers no postgraduate courses. The prospects are not good: the undergraduate courses are voracious and the Department of Education and Science has not responded warmly to the suggestion that it might earmark certain sums for postgraduate courses. In terms of mere numbers this is understandable—at present there are 50,000 undergraduates and 400 graduate students—but the development of postgraduate courses will be valuable. □

Profits in academia

One way the Open University is hoping to cushion itself from the uncertainties of government funding is by setting up a company to market its educational materials. Marketing as a part of the university administration is as old as the university itself but it is hoped that Open University Educational Enterprises Ltd will greatly expand the business.

All is still in the air, though, while the university discusses the project with the Department of Education and Science which, after the resounding failure of a similar venture, British Museum Publications Ltd, is somewhat nervous of letting public funds be used as risk capital. The OU, however, is confident that the go-ahead will come in time for the company to start business on January 1 as planned. Large amounts of capital are not required as some of the present marketing division's profits are ploughed back into marketing. According to the university the talks are mainly to thrash out the right relationship of the new company to the university and to make sure that it is properly structured.

From the university's point of view, a company owned by the university has several advantages over a division of the university administration, among them the freedom the company would have to offer salesmen a suitably attractive salary instead of having to pay them on academic administration scales. The company may also clarify the copyright position—at present although the written word is the main teaching medium in the Open University the academics hold the copyright on their works as in any other university.

More than half the income from the sale of the Open University's books, tapes, films and cheap scientific equipment comes from abroad. The university feels there is plenty of room for the marketing company to expand: the marketing division cannot deal as well as it would like even with its present markets. If the new company succeeds, as is hoped, in increasing turnover from the present £700,000 a year to £1 million by 1980, it will be contributing a significant supplement to the £12 million government grant.