Trinidad wants more autonomy for University of the West Indies' campuses

University buildings at St. Augustine, Trinidad

THE government of Trinidad and Tobago has recently published a White Paper on science and technology which has raised something of a storm in the Caribbean. Many see it as a blow to the regional University of the West Indies. It suggests that Trinidad and Tobago should set up a National Institute of Higher Education (Research, Science and Technology) because the university is unsuited to their needs.

The university is plagued by the administrative problems of running three separate campuses one in each of Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica (Trinidad and Jamaica are 1,000 miles apart). Now, however, the oil age has added an extra dimension to its problems. Trinidad and Tobago are riding high on oil, but the other economies, especially Jamaica's, are in trouble. Consequently

Trinidad and Tobago feel they are being hampered in their industrialisation programme by a bureaucratic and unadaptable university.

This is not new: in the late 1960s similar charges came from Jamaica when its economy was buoyant. The charge of unwieldiness in the system is impossible to refute: decisions creep through a tangle of committees in a structure which some staff on the smaller campuses view as a way to retain power. There are also problems of any multi-national university: inadequate financing, governments in arrears and conflicting national objectives.

The latest proposals from Trinidad and Tobago seek to give more autonomy to the individual campuses. The White Paper outlines possible new management and financing structures for

the university. It suggests that the cost of each campus should be borne by the 'host' government and that a small central university authority should have an advisory role over finance and new developments. (The central authority would maintain control of planning of regional programmes and execution of common university services.)

The university response to these comments has been to admit to bureaucratic inefficiency. But it also points out that it has worked on at least nine government financed projects including several funded by Trinidad and Tobago. It also points to agreed expansion in engineering (especially in petroleum engineering) and to the planned medical school in Trinidad.

Outside the university is the feeling that an institution of 800 academics is bound to be expensive for some of the territories, and even in the best circumstances university research is unlikely to have the kind of dramatic impact which impatient developing countries want. Inside the university there is the feeling that bureaucracy has brought this action on itself. But there is another view: that while both comments above are quite correct, the White Paper is a political ploy. At one level the paper seeks to convey an image of a go-ahead government restrained by a slow-motion university; at another it creates the impression of a dynamic economy held back by a number of troubled ones.

There is at least one clear reference to the effect of differing ideologies. Jamaica and Guyana have, for some years, proclaimed themselves socialist states of one kind or another. One effect of this was a call for 'democratisation' of the campuses and 'involvement of all in the decision making process'. The White Paper proposes a return to the autocratic structure on the Trinidad campus: "Thus the so-called democratisation process may develop on the Jamaica campus independent of whatever management structure evolves on the Trinidad and Tobago campus".

Philbert Morris

What the White Paper says

Science in Trinidad has been "influenced on the one hand by the establishment of the University of the West Indies and on the other, by the absence of any meaningful indigenous activities, within the private sector.... Substantial resources were channelled into the university, with the hope that its efforts in the medical sciences, engineering, education and management would be adequate to meet the demands of the country. The industrial sector, dominated by the transnational corporations, relied exclusively on imported technology for its own needs. Such foreign knowledge was applied without being absorbed by the internal technological infrastructure".

The paper talks of the:

- "absence of a policy for technology related to national objectives;
- a complete lack of coordination of the national effort in technology;
- the growing tendency towards individual effort of both persons and organisations;
- the proliferation of new institutions,

new advisory groups, councils, committees, etc;

- lack of relationship between the education plan and national needs;
- lack of a coherent plan for education oriented towards technology;
- absence of an environment that places science and technology in its proper perspective;
- a continuing and increasing dependence on imported technology with all the worst features of the traffic in technology;
- limited initiatives in research and development;
- complete neglect by local business of research and development; it hardly ever appears as a legitimate cost in local operations;
- the brain drain;
- an almost static picture in the level of technology;
- a growing deterioration in the level of technology in certain areas—for example road maintenance and production of certain agricultural crops—in which there was originally a reasonable level in indigenous technology."