

nature**30 August 1979**

Dr Boyson's provocative challenge

No-one likes cuts in higher education — but if they must come, let them be selective

There was an uneasy feeling around in the British higher education community at the time of the first Conservative budget (in June) that such belt-tightening as was called for (it included the unwelcome increase in VAT) was not the end of the matter. The Government was taking its time brooding about education and science, and was not really expected to show its hand before the Autumn. Now at least one aspect of the forthcoming white paper on education has been made clear, namely that there will be a cut of up to 6% in student intake into universities in 1980. The University Grants Committee, on the recommendation of the Department of Education and Science, has alerted universities not to make 1980 commitments beyond 94% of their 1979 levels.

Dr Rhodes Boyson, the UK Minister in charge of higher and further education, has defended the proposed cuts on the grounds that Britain now has "the most expensive higher education system in the world". This seems hard to justify in the face of recently published figures which in fact show that Britain's spending on education is the third-lowest sum per capita in the Common Market (*Euroforum*; 13 July 79). In 1975 an average of £144 was spent on education per head of population compared with figures of £277 in Denmark, £239 in Holland and £209 in Belgium. Only Ireland and Italy came lower on the list.

It is clear that Dr Rhodes Boyson, minister in charge of higher and further education, is flexing his muscles to do what politicians have traditionally shrunk away from — interfere in the sacred area of a university's autonomy to teach what subjects it wishes. He is reported to have said that he would defend keeping alive all subjects currently being taught, but "in some universities, not all". It is clear that Dr Boyson would seek to impose the least restraint on mathematicians and "hard scientists" whom he regards as in short supply, but he adds ominously that "there is no shortage in certain arts subjects", and he has apparently asked officials at the Department of Education and Science to report on subject areas which have large graduate unemployment. This, of course, makes the assumption that the present-day predilections of employers should control the future of British universities.

However it is important to see these cuts in their detailed perspective — and the number of potential university students change substantially year by year. Recently the

percentage of eighteen-year-olds who have been both able and willing to pursue a university course has remained fairly static. On the other hand, the baby boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s has raised the numbers of those in the eighteen-year-old bracket by a few percent each year. These numbers will continue to grow into the early 1980s, but thereafter will show a progressive decline until by the mid-1990s there will have been a drop of 25% on the peak value in the early 1980s.

It has been a matter of discussion for some time whether universities should be restricted in their intake for the next few years in order to 'tunnel' through the peak, whether they should be allowed to expand up to the early 1980s but then be forced to contract with declining numbers seeking admission, or whether they should be allowed to expand but then encouraged to maintain peak numbers by more vigorous recruitment programmes or by extending opportunities for continuing education, or education at a later stage in life. The last Labour government seemed to be moving towards the last option, whereas the present Conservative government looks as if it is intent on 'tunnelling'. By so doing they will of course begin to close out options on continuing education.

One further piece of perspective must be added. Following the Robbins Report, there was an enormous expansion of university places in the 1960s to meet the Robbins principle that all students who wished to go to university and who were qualified should be allowed to do so. New universities sprung up and hired staff in vast numbers, thus giving the priorities of the mid-1960s enormous emphasis in the university system. There have been continuing discreet mutterings among academics about the quality of some of the departments formed and about the low standards of entry that apply in some places. So although the university community as a whole will throw up its hands in horror at Dr Boyson trespassing on their territory and daring to declare certain preferences, some thoughtful people will be quietly curious to see whether a politician will be able to pull off what has needed to be done for some time but which academics could never bring themselves to do — to recognise that the quality is not uniform throughout the British university system and to make an effort to ensure that if there have to be cuts, they do not fall uniformly everywhere