

## . . . or does the West have too much control?

THE Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) advertises itself as a centre of excellence which "provides opportunities for men and women of diverse Asian nationalities to study and work together to seek, define, and test technological solutions to the common problems affecting the quality of life in Asia". This claim is indeed partly justified; but the institute's impact on Asia, as a whole, has been negligible.

AIT's approach to the problems of Asia is based on the belief that academic excellence can be integrated with teaching and research for appropriate solutions to Asian problems. This approach has largely paid off and AIT can justly claim that its graduates are tailor-made for Asia's needs and that as a post-graduate technological institute it has produced over the past two decades, a small cadre of technocrats that now occupies key positions in Asia's private sector.

On the research front too, most AIT projects are based on problems of practical importance relevant to Asia's development. In their own way, some of these projects, such as integrated farm study, a small scale fishery project, slum settlements and flood forecasting studies, have made significant contributions at local level.

However, from a general regional perspective, AIT's contribution to Asia seems almost insignificant. In 1977, for example, AIT graduates included one graduate from Iran, 7 from Malaysia, 12 from Pakistan, 20 from Sri Lanka and 49 from Thailand. This year, AIT's graduate output included one student from Iran, 9 from Malaysia, 11 from Indonesia, 14 from Pakistan and 16 from Sri Lanka. On this basis of graduate output almost every

technological university in the UK can claim to contribute much more to the educational development of Asia than AIT. With the exception of human settlement development, research at AIT too has failed to have a regional impact.

Indeed, both from the point of view of education and research, the chief beneficiary of AIT's endeavours is Thailand. Over one-third of AIT Alumni are Thais. Of the 15 research projects started in 1978, nine were related directly to the needs and requirements of Thailand.

AIT has considerable difficulty attracting students. Universities and colleges in many Asian countries do not know of its existence and consequently cannot recommend their graduates to apply for its post-graduate training. Even when a student applies and is accepted, political reasons may prevent him from attending. Most students who can go abroad to study would prefer to go to the West than to AIT in spite of its excellent reputation.

One reason why AIT has not made a significant impact on the region is that, even after twenty years, it is still regarded as an alien body. Even in Thailand, it is looked upon as having been transplanted from the West. In other Asian countries too AIT is thought of as non-Asian. In Pakistan, Iran and Turkey it is hard to find science policy makers at the ministerial level who do not have some reservations about it.

Part of the reason why AIT is labelled as an alien institution is that it is administered and funded largely by the West. Less than half of its 39-member Board of Trustees are Asian, and most of these are Thais with a token Malaysian, Indian, Indonesian and

Sri Lankan. Amongst AIT's major backers are IBM, Shell, Esso and Bes Engineering. Other major contributors include Canada, Japan, US, Thailand and the Ford, Rockefeller, Chase Manhattan, Readers' Digest and Starr Foundations.

On the whole, the donors keep a good eye on the institute. Visits by their representatives are frequent. Indeed, as Dr Robert Excell, Associate Director of Energy Technology Division, who has been at AIT almost a decade says, some donors tend to dictate and influence AIT's policy. This trend seems to be increasing and, according to Excell, is a major area of concern for AIT's future. "We must try and remain independent of donor influence in the future", he says.

Donor influence apart, a major future area of AIT's contribution to the region is specialised science information. AIT has an excellent Regional Documentation Centre which was set up in 1977 with the objective of improving access to information in the region and of initiating and participating in information projects on a regional basis. There are also four specialised information centres that have already proved their worth: the Asian Information Centre on Geotechnical Engineering, the International Ferrocement Information Centre, the Renewable Energy Resources Information Centre and the Environmental Sanitation Information Centre. AIT's Regional Information Centre, together with the four special information centres, could act as a regional focal point for the global information system proposed by UNCSTD (*Nature* 6 September page 4), if AIT can seek out users and meet their needs.

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## US strengthens scientific links with Latin America

Closer scientific links between the US and various Latin American countries are expected to follow a visit made last month to four countries by a top level team of science policy makers, headed by the President's science adviser, Dr Frank Press.

The delegation stressed that the purpose of the visits was directly in line with the agreements reached at the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development in Vienna in August. "I was very pleased with the trip — the response was very warm and positive", Dr Press told *Nature*.

The visit also helped to prepare the ground for US strategy at the annual meeting of the Organisation of American States, which opened in Bolivia recently, at which the US is keen to promote technological and economic cooperation between Latin American countries as a way of promoting political stability on the

entire American continent.

During the visits to Peru and Barbados, for example, the US delegation met with representatives of the two regional organisations, the Andean Pact, and the Economic Pact between Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia and Bolivia — and the Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM).

During the visit to Peru, the delegation met officials of the Junta del Acuerdo de Cartagena, the secretariat for the Andean Pact, to emphasize its willingness to support research programmes initiated by the Junta aimed at increasing technical collaboration between the five countries (see *Nature*, 12 October 1978).

The delegation's visit to Venezuela was aimed primarily at strengthening scientific links which already exist with the US. Particular attention was paid to proposals from the Venezuelan side on developing cooperation in basic and applied scientific

research, particularly in the fields of marine biology, neurobiology, electronics and hydrology.

In Brazil, it was more a question of rebuilding links that have been strained in recent years. Here the specific topics under discussion included coal liquefaction technology, long-distance energy transmission by superconductors, and establishment of a diagnostic reference centre, as well as industrial technology and inter-university science and technology cooperation.

During the visit to Barbados, the delegation met with representatives of other regional development and research organisations. A communiqué issued after the meeting said that "the two sides expressed satisfaction with the progress made in the limited time available towards establishing a sound basis for science and technology cooperation between the United States and the Caribbean". □