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## Foreign students: time for the government to do its sums

To judge by the pattern of previous years more than 90% of all applications for university places for the next UK academic year have now been made, and it looks, at first sight, as if overseas applicants have not been substantially deterred by the government's ill-considered decision to make this year's fees two to five times higher than last year's. The acid test, however, both for universities and other institutes of further education will come after the summer when they discover the rate of conversion of applicants into real students bearing the new fees. And since the omens do not look good, the universities are gloomily pondering the likely consequences.

There was, and still is, little evidence that much thought went into the possible consequences of last November's decision to raise the fees. Rather, the decision was part of the government's sweeping monetarist policies aimed at reducing public expenditure. The facts were that in 1978 87,000 overseas students attended UK institutions of further education (35,000 at universities) and that they were being subsidised by the British taxpayer to the sum of £100 million per annum.

In order to save the taxpayer that sum it was decided to charge overseas students the full cost of their studies. That meant £3,000 per annum for undergraduate science courses and £5,000 per annum for those undertaking medical, dental or veterinary studies. The fees for postgraduates were not stipulated, but many universities have decided to use the same rates.

The universities have been warned to expect their grants to be cut in the next academic year by an amount commensurate with their past intake of foreign students. It will be up to the universities to recoup their lost income from the students. The question is: what happens if much of the income does not materialize because the universities find themselves priced out of the market? — a distinct likelihood according to recent polls of extant foreign students in the UK that have been taken both by universities and student bodies.

There are certain prestige institutions whose very existence would be immediately threatened were their intake of overseas students to drop by the 40% to 90% that some of the polls suggest. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine with 75% foreign students and the Royal Postgraduate School of Medicine with 47% foreign students are particularly vulnerable. The Imperial College of Science and Technology and the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology would also have serious problems.

Even a considerably smaller shortfall in foreign students than the polls suggest will have serious consequences. In the first place it will inevitably exacerbate the academic job shortage, and make yet gloomier the prospect of easing the situation, given the demographic decline in home-grown students that begins in a few years' time.

Next, a shortage of foreign postgraduate students seriously threatens the quantity of research carried out in the UK, since many a busy academic runs his or her research project with one or

more hard-working foreign graduates. And they are irreplaceable because there is neither the financial support nor the moral justification — given current career prospects — to replace foreign graduate students with more from within these shores.

Another worrying prospect about the increase in fees is that it will not just deprive foreign students of an education in the UK, but that it will altogether hinder their chances of overseas studies. In particular, the many students from developing countries that were once British colonies who have taken advantage of the subsidised rates on offer in the UK may neither be able to afford the new fees nor to find the places or the cash to study elsewhere overseas. That would be not just a blow to the individuals and their countries of origin, but would also decrease UK influence in worldwide scientific and educational matters.

For the present, the government is adopting a policy of wait-and-see, possibly because it is not particularly concerned about the outcome either way. Thus, if it turns out that the new fees can be afforded by the majority of students, no harm will have been done. Whereas any substantial drop in student numbers can be used to justify a retrenchment of the funding of further education, a welcome opportunity for a government intent on cutting public expenditure. Presumably the government does anticipate a drop in overseas student numbers, because it has repeatedly emphasized that their number has almost trebled in the past decade, and that it currently exceeds by 15,000 the nominal quota set by the previous government. It has also argued that many of the current overseas students come from wealthy oil-producing countries well able to afford the new fees — an argument that ignores the plight of those who cannot and the fact that universities estimate that no more than ten per cent of their foreign students come from the wealthier nations.

The only concession so far made by the architects of the new policy is to provide the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals with enough money to provide bursaries covering the increase in fees to the 400 most able postgraduate students. Even that small but welcome concession is likely to be more than wiped out by the effects of last summer's 15% cut in the budget of the Overseas Development Administration which, in 1978, had supported in part or in whole more than 9,000 students from developing countries pursuing academic qualifications in the UK.

In the circumstances, what is urgently needed is some real idea of government thinking on the consequences of its policy. At present, even the very genuine concerns of such threatened centres as the Royal Postgraduate Medical School have been met with a stony wait-and-see response from the government, who could surely provide some concrete reassurance about their survival in the event of a serious loss of foreign students. In any case, faced with the contradictory evidence of the number of applications and the polls of students already here, it is surely time for the government to devise and carry out some real investigation of the rate at which foreign students will appear next academic year. □