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New ways from the liberal arts?

The University of Chicago, once a prolific source of academic innovation, is charting a new course. Will it have the courage to follow its own prescription? And is that radical enough?

Like many other private universities strong in the liberal arts, the University of Chicago is worried about its future. One problem is simply demographic; the decline of the birth-rate that set in in the 1960s is about to bite. But Chicago is being hurt by other trends — the flight from language preparation in secondary schools in the United States in the past fifteen years for example. One curious consequence is that Chicago, traditionally strong in foreign-language study, has found that its students are more interested in exotic languages than in more common languages such as French and German. The result is that even at the graduate student level, demands on academic resources are accentuated and that telephone calls or access to photocopying machines seem even more like luxuries than they are already in hard-pressed humanities and social science departments. What is to be done?

The university's own solution, hammered out in the past two years by an internal committee appointed by president Hannah Holborn Gray, is that Chicago must radically restructure its higher degrees in the liberal arts if it is to hold its own in the years ahead. The committee rightly deplores the trend to specialization in the liberal arts, the humanities and the social sciences, which has had the effect of locking up graduate students in one-track lines of study for up to eight years. When academic jobs, at Chicago or elsewhere, are quickly drying up, it is no wonder that graduate students are increasingly shy of such courses. The committee's remedy, to turn the courses leading to the master's degree into broad yet rigorous programmes of study that would prepare people for the effective pursuit of intellectual interests in the real world outside the university, is sensible. High time, it may be thought, that students of Spanish should know something of the politics of Central or South America, or that social science students should profit from the strengths of Chicago's professional schools, business and law for example. The committee is also right to insist that such courses can be academically and educationally worthwhile, not mere trash baskets for the output of Chicago's spare teaching capacity, and to offer as an example the masters' programme at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. What it cannot, of course, promise is the Chicago faculty's willingness to collaborate with this ambitious plan. President Gray is behind the plan, but the departmental baronies have yet to declare themselves.

Making a virtue of necessity is now common among academics. The committee's dictum that "leanness (which in the United States is often perceived as meanness) is also opportunity", fits neatly into this tradition. But there are also good educational grounds for asking that students following doctoral courses in the liberal arts and the humanities should not be allowed to rattle around like lost souls, but should work in research institutes that would force them to rub shoulders with disciplines other than their own and also give them a chance to learn skills other than those of simple scholarship. This is potentially a valuable suggestion, a kind of regrafting of the old German notion of the Humboldt university onto a system of graduate education originally fashioned, in the United States, on that model. Whether it is necessary, or even desirable, to restrict these courses, as the committee suggests, to students who will become academics is another matter. Why not see what the market provides?

Internally, these recommendations will seem to many like a recipe for revolution, but others will be asking whether they go far

enough. The rumpus caused last year by Mr Stephen White's tract called *The New Liberal Arts* has not yet died down. White's argument that a liberal arts education is no longer complete if mathematics and computer language are neglected sent waves of panic round liberal arts establishments, some of which have nevertheless been converted by the hunks of money that the Sloan Foundation has handed out to thirty liberal arts colleges (none of them a research university in the Chicago class). Nobody would pretend that the "new liberal arts" recipe is always best, but Chicago would surely be well placed to follow some such route towards a marriage of the two cultures. The biggest disappointment of Chicago's own proposals for reform is that, while coming out strongly against narrow specialization, they fail even to flirt with this adventurous remedy.

No to Lords by a lady

The British government has lost an opportunity to improve its administration of research.

The perennial question of how the British government should improve its administration of research and development is endlessly boring but nevertheless important. These are some reasons why. Last week, the British government found itself having to tell an international conference in Stockholm that it would spend more on acid rain research, thus restoring funds to a programme recently truncated. The British agriculture ministry, which has for several years used cyanide gas to kill off badgers thought to harbour bovine tuberculosis, has shamefacedly retreated from its policy in the face of evidence that the technique is inhumane. Within the past three years, the mechanism for supporting university research (dually, by grant-making research councils and by general subsidy of universities) has collapsed and nobody knows how it should be resuscitated. The committees that judiciously decide whether this or that research organization should have fractionally more or less to spend next year will cheerfully shrug off responsibility for these disasters, major and minor. For has not the dual-support system collapsed under economic adversity? And surely the difficulties about badgers and acid rain are too tiny to be allowed to bother busy and important people?

This insouciance is mistaken, as is the complacency running through the government's (Cmnd 8591, HMSO, £1.65) reply last week to the modest proposals for change produced last year by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology (see *Nature* 294, 503; 1981). The trouble with what passes for science policy (and one of the reasons why it is so boring) is the customary separation of the process from its content, the medium from the message.

Faced with a set of recommendations which, far from being radical, were guilefully designed to be compatible with present arrangements, the government has countered with even more modest proposals of its own. Yes, it says, the two principal advisory committees function less effectively than they should, but a little committee-engineering can easily fix that. If the Advisory Board for the Research Councils has let its concern for the uncontentious partitioning of funds among its member research councils take precedence over what should have been its