

become especially hazardous for the weaker universities if, as seems probable, the British government finds a way of ridding the universities of the quota system under which they now have to labour, for then the weak among them would be known not merely in common-room gossip but from their success (or the opposite) in attracting students.

Another abiding problem of British higher education which academics stolidly refuse to contemplate is educational. British universities, insistent as they are on the equation between academic excellence and academic freedom, and used to equating freedom with the right to do what they have always done, pay very little attention to the way in which they educate their students. Prepared though they are to go to the barricades whenever the grants committee should suggest that one or other of them should abandon its degree course in agriculture or Portuguese, their willingness to delegate the selection of the students whom they will teach to a computer centre in Cheltenham is a proof that they are only half-serious. If British universities hope to survive, they must set out to choose their own students by their own devices, snapping their fingers at the cumbersome apparatus of school-leaving examinations but saying instead that they will provide a higher education for sufficiently able if ill-prepared students even if that means teaching them for four years and not just three. The government would not welcome such a development, but would not be qualified to resist.

But are British universities not autonomous institutions, whose academics collectively decide what kinds of places they should be? That is the theory, but no longer the practice. In an ideal world, or even in the United States, universities conscious that their reputations leave something to be desired would think of strengthening their claims on student and academic attention by offering good teachers attractive terms of service. In Britain, there is instead a nationally agreed scale of salaries for academics from which Oxbridge is to some extent exempt. The result is that even when some provincial university is able to create a superb department in some field, the advantage is bound to be short-lived; the people concerned will eventually be hired away to a more prestigious or congenial place. If on the other hand some university should model itself on some place that is not Oxbridge but, say, the University of Aachen or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it would quickly find itself regarded by its peers as a kind of jumped-up polytechnic — and would equally be prevented from keeping its academics by the uniformity of the terms of service under which it (and they) labour.

The agenda accumulating for the next chairman of the University Grants Committee is therefore formidable: how to share out a government subvention while providing those who depend on it with an incentive towards diversity, how to educate most students more broadly without sacrificing the service now provided by those universities that are already excellent, and how to make a bridge between universities and other higher education establishments without humiliating either. There follows from this a simple recipe:

- Pensioner universities should be compelled towards autonomy, told in advance what their budgets will be for as many years ahead as can be managed but then subjected to an intellectual rather than procedural review of their academic attainments.

- Universities should be reminded (some have forgotten) that the reason for their existence is the education of the young; the opportunity for research follows from that, and is not capable of being institutionalized by itself. Getting hold of suitable entrants to undergraduate courses should therefore be central to most universities' concerns (in which case the abandonment of school-leaving examinations and the disbandment of UCCA will come naturally). Teaching elementary courses (and worrying about how well they are doing) will naturally frighten British academics (in which cases they should be fired).

- Making bridges with the rest of higher education should be relatively simple: why should not the University Grants Committee provide support for the infrastructure of good research whenever it may be carried out?

Biting off others' tongues

The UK Medical Research Council seems to be irrationally sensitive about a planned clinical trial.

The blank space on page 310 is intended to be spectacular. Earlier this week, the space was occupied by a reasonable letter replying to an earlier piece of correspondence from Dr Arthur Wynn (see *Nature* 11 November, p.102) raising doubts about the British Medical Research Council's plan to carry out a controlled study of the utility of folic acid as a dietary supplement in the prevention of recurring embryonic neural tube defects, usually manifested as spina bifida in human births. After the page concerned had been readied for printing, the author of the letter asked that it should be withdrawn on the grounds that its publication would acutely embarrass the Medical Research Council, but for reasons that he did not fully understand. As it happens, the same disputed page of *Nature* had earlier on the same day been adorned with yet another item of correspondence on the same subject arguing that the disputed trials had needlessly been delayed for two years, during which time it had become apparent that the balance between the risks of folic acid supplements, and the benefits thereof, had shifted towards the latter. That letter had also been withdrawn, again at the request of the Medical Research Council.

Objectively, there should be no problem about the plan to mount a controlled study in Britain of the influence of folic acid on the incidence of neural tube defects (spina bifida) in human births. Two years ago, the UK Department of Health seems to have taken that view, calling a meeting to plan how the trial should be carried out. Delay has allowed three categories of ethical concerns to flourish — protests that if there is evidence that folic acid will prevent spina bifida, it is unfair to deny the mothers in the control group the appropriate supplement of their diet, the claim that unnaturally large amounts of folic acid in the diet may be harmful (shades of fluoride in the drinking water) and legalistic but unrealistic worries (in a country in which abortion is permissible but not entirely free) that for a mother to consent to membership of the control group denied folic acid supplement would be to infringe the rights of a child unborn or even not conceived.

None of these arguments is absolute. The case that folic acid will prevent recurrences of spina bifida is strong but not overwhelming; it would be more persuasive if there were a convincing tale to tell of how this supplement, rather than some other, were effective. The chance that folic acid might be harmful would be more persuasive if the chemical were cheaper. The challenge to the rights of the unborn child is philosophically powerful but only to the extent that putative parents sense that unborn children could be cured of putative spina bifida by a suitable dose of folic acid.

Resolving such issues patently requires nothing less than what the Department of Health had in mind two years ago — a controlled trial set up in such a way that it could be abandoned quickly. The Medical Research Council should resolve on such a course when it meets next, on 7 December. It should not be deterred by what the politicians have to say.

Meanwhile, innocent bystanders should ask themselves why *Nature* should be printing several square inches of empty space, and why the authors of the words that would ordinarily have filled them have at the last minute been frightened away from publication. In each case, the groups concerned have said that the pressure came from the Medical Research Council. By all accounts, it would be entirely unworthy to suppose that any component of that pressure is concerned with future research grants or their availability. But can it really be sensible that a research council already sufficiently entangled with muddy and muddled political issues beyond its competence should also seek (and successfully) to suppress what its own people have to say, if not openly in its defence then in the cause of helping the understanding of a tendentious issue?