

Belgian universities

Preparing for seven lean years

Brussels

BALANCING the books in the field of education and other areas of public spending is still causing problems despite Belgium's seven-year plan to bring expenditure into line with income. Last October (see *Nature* 299, 767; 1982), the government demanded of Belgium's universities that they should present plans to bring their growing debts and deficits under control by 1989 or risk losing their autonomy. Since then, though, the government's stance towards public spending has toughened as it became increasingly clear that despite ruthless austerity measures the public spending deficit was still out of control.

The hard line taken by the centre-right government led by Wilfried Martens was reflected in the decision made at the end of January to reject as inadequate the plans drawn up by two of Wallonia's largest universities, Liège and ULB (Université Libre de Bruxelles).

More disquieting have been the unpleasant measures taken against Belgium's im-



The Catholic University of Louvain la Neuve, where the staff has accepted salary cuts.

migrant communities. A fortnight ago the mayor of Schaerbeek, one of Brussels' communes, closed down nine schools attended by 3,000 children, mainly from the large community of migrant workers. Roger Nols, the mayor or *Bourgmestre*, declared that the cost of supporting the schools was too high and demanded that the state intervene.

The government has been unsympathetic. It has itself taken an aggressive stance against foreigners. The children of foreign students as well as anyone without a work permit are now to be charged school fees for attending school above the official leaving age of 14. Only under considerable pressure did the government reverse its decision at the end of 1982 to oblige all Belgian universities to demand fees from all foreign students instead of leaving it to the university's discretion. Only postgraduate students from a reduced list of developing countries could hope to have their education fees paid but now the richest universities can still accept foreign students over the 2 per cent of places reserved for students from developed countries. In the past, Belgium has had the reputation

of being one of the most generous European countries. Even after the French universities began closing their doors under Giscard d'Estaing, there were no limits on the numbers of students from developing countries, who enrolled almost exclusively at the francophone universities where they were seen as a useful way of boosting income. Under the Belgian system, the state funds universities according to the number of students registered.

But more tussles between the education minister, Michel Tromont, and some of the universities can be expected in the coming week. The education minister decided at the end of January to reject the plans of the universities of Liège and ULB. They have been given until 15 March to come up with more satisfactory proposals. ULB, with some 40,000 students one of Belgium's largest universities, is asking for BF 500 million (£6.6 million) which it claims is still owing to it from a previous administration and has taken the government to court. The ministry remains intransigent and demands that the university redoes its sums.

Liège, with 10,000 students, is in the deepest trouble. Faced with an accumulated debt of BF 1,000 million (£13.3 million), its seven-year plan was rejected because it still allowed for a post-1989 deficit of around BF 700 million. A state university, as opposed to ULB or the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve (UCL), which are free universities, it has about 300 unwanted ancillary staff who have the status of civil servants and therefore cannot be fired. Liège will have to find another way of reducing its costs.

Many other Belgian universities have been forced to delve into their *patrimoine* or assets accrued from carrying out research, from gifts or by selling off land or buildings. Professor Woitrin, general administrator of UCL, feels that the ways being used by Belgian universities to solve financial problems of the sort being faced all over Europe can serve as useful lessons to others. Woitrin's own university has cut the number of ancillary staff by 250 and has negotiated an agreement with all employees to cut the gross wages bill by 15 per cent through a progressive reduction in salaries. The staff will in real terms be accepting a drop in spending power of up to 4.25 per cent for the highest paid. In return they can expect to have their loss in earnings matched by increases paid once the seven lean years are over.

This leaves UCL and other Belgium universities more favourably placed to face the future compared with government-controlled institutions in France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Cuts in teaching staff have been avoided and the numbers and mobility of research assistants have also been unaffected, although a restructuring of courses is in hand. **Jasper Becker**

Education in China

Government seeks reform

SWEEPING changes in the structure of higher education in China, advocated by a recent forum in Beijing (Peking), would give the university authorities considerable autonomy over admissions, employment and financial policy. The minister of education, He Dongchang, who addressed the symposium, said that the reforms were "imperative" and should be carried out "with the strongest resolve".

The proposed package of reforms would give universities and higher colleges the right to dispose of funds earned by their research and consultancy work for industry and allow lecturers to take on part-time work outside.

The forum particularly condemned the practice of sharing out the wage fund equally, regardless of individual effort and performance. Under the new system, students would be encouraged to be more adventurous in their studies, dropping their present assumption that, once admitted to a university, they are assured of a job for life.

The minister emphasized the need for a reform of university management which, to judge from the Chinese press, is urgent. Until six months ago, for example, the "educational and administrative leadership" of Hunan University included only one person who had received a university education.

Minister He specially commended the Chinese University of Science and Technology and the Jiaotong University in Shanghai for their management reforms. In the past two years the latter has cut its lecturing personnel from 1,040 to 700, at the same time increasing the volume of teaching work by 30 per cent, and raising its earnings from research and consultancy work for industry from 800,000 yuan in 1981 to 1.5 million yuan in 1982.

The intended reforms aim to enable the universities to meet the demands of the "four modernizations" that are the keystone of Chinese development policy. The value of university-trained specialists is not, however, always clear to the Chinese rank and file who still show the anti-intellectual bias inculcated during the Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese media and party propagandists are mounting a major campaign against this attitude, both with straightforward exhortation and anecdotes, such as the recent case of engineering designer Wu Bauxin. He was denounced by a group of workers at the factory where he was employed for having received a payment of 1,020 yuan for a single design, which subsequently earned for the factory 450,000 yuan. The critics, the *People's Daily* commented, "do not understand the hardships of research and design work". **Vera Rich**