

Israeli universities

Government's cuts hit hard

Rehovot

ISRAEL'S institutions of higher education, already very disturbed by a recent government decision to cut its support for universities by 6-8 per cent (in real terms) during the next academic year, are absolutely appalled by a new finance ministry proposal that this support be reduced by a further 10 per cent. Some university presidents have gone so far as to suggest that the whole system of higher education in this country may collapse if the proposal is implemented.

It is only one of many austerity measures recommended last week by finance minister Yoram Aridor in a desperate attempt to forestall further deterioration of Israel's economy, and particularly a further increase in its foreign debt. During the six years that the Begin government has been in power, this debt has risen from \$11,000 million to \$21,000 million.

Professor Dan Patinkin, president of the Hebrew University and himself an economist, agrees that government spending must be reduced, but argues that support for higher education and research deserves a very high priority, and certainly should not suffer more than other sectors. He foresees "inevitable stagnation" if there are further budget cuts, which will prevent institutions of higher education from hiring younger people with innovative ideas.

Hitherto, says Professor Patinkin, Israel has been the only country of its size where both university teaching and research have been up to the "highest international standards". He warns that the maintenance of such standards will be impossible if funds are further reduced, and that "once deterioration sets in, it will be extremely difficult to reverse."

Weizmann Institute president Michael Sela hopes that some compromise will be reached, based on "extremely selective cuts." otherwise, he fears that the present university system "may not survive."

Despite past financial problems, says Professor Sela, the Weizmann Institute has managed to provide tenured positions for 50 extremely talented young scientists over the past eight years, a period during which only a handful of professors retired. This was made possible by holding down administrative expenses and foregoing any attempt to expand the institute's physical facilities. But Sela sees little chance of providing places for more tenured scientists or even of financing the work of those already on the staff if the mooted cuts are implemented.

Both Professor Sela and Professor Ephraim Kehat, vice president for academic affairs of the Haifa Technion, warn about the adverse effect of a declining university system on the country's booming science-based industries. Professor

Kehat points out that government support for the Technion, which trains a majority of Israel's engineers, has already declined by 30 per cent during the past eight years. "If it goes down much more," says Kehat, "departments will have to be closed and student intake reduced."

Professor Moshe Many, who took over as president of Tel Aviv University only last month, is already deeply involved in the struggle to prevent further reductions in government support for the university system. As a physician he described their probable effect in medical terms: "It won't be possible to deal with the cuts by putting the universities on a diet designed to eliminate body fat. They will require the amputation of whole teaching and research areas".

Professor Haim Harari, who heads the planning and grants committee of Israel's Council for Higher Education and who, with his five colleagues on the committee,

will have to decide how the cuts are to be implemented, has yet to comment on the situation (because he is overseas). But his introduction to the planning and grants committee's 1981/82 report, published this May, shows his probable reaction. In that statement he warned that the cutbacks already implemented had resulted in a lowering of standards. For example, while the student population at Israel's universities has increased by 30 per cent during the previous decade, their academic staff has declined by 3 per cent. There was also less money for equipment, libraries and the hiring of younger researchers. Unless this situation improved, he wrote, "Israel's security, economy and culture will suffer in the not too distant future".

Will protests and warnings from the university persuade the government to abandon the 10 per cent cut? No one knows. But at a time when the finance minister has also recommended that pensions be taxed, maternity grants ended and hundreds of high school teaching positions eliminated, it will not be an easy struggle.

Nechemia Meyers

US nuclear industry

Glimmers of hope

Washington

THE American nuclear power industry, which has not received a single domestic order for a new reactor since 1978 and suffered 18 cancellations last year, may get a helping hand from the State Department in finding new customers overseas. After talks with other government agencies and the principal manufacturers, the department is hoping to create a Nuclear Safety Training Academy that could offer cut-price advice and training to foreign countries embarking on civil nuclear power programmes.

Although it has fallen on hard times, the American nuclear industry remains the biggest in the world and enjoys the warm support of the Reagan Administration. The academy would be a sign of the United States' commitment to nuclear safety and give American firms a market edge by familiarizing potential customers with US technology and safety practices.

As envisaged, however, the function of the new academy would be limited. Several firms involved in talks with the State Department were lukewarm about a proposal that might duplicate the extensive training programmes already offered by the major manufacturers, universities and national laboratories. The General Electric Company, for example, offers 82 courses in nine different areas of nuclear training and maintains simulators for its boiling water reactors. Training services are part of the companies' sales packages.

Instead, the new academy would consist of a small foundation, jointly funded by government and industry, whose main job would be to coordinate existing training

courses. A preliminary report on the academy's work says industry would be "intimately" involved in its activities and individuals attending the academy would spend much of their time with utility companies, vendors and architect-engineers.

Supporters of the academy believe it could nevertheless fill an important gap in safety training, by attracting high-level utility managers and policy-makers as well as plant managers and operators. Safety courses run by plant manufacturers are usually oriented towards lower-level operators. The academy would design a special course for senior officials in government and industry, lasting several weeks and including visits to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Department of Energy, national laboratories and utilities at various stages of construction.

Initial plans for the academy have been approved in principle by a working group of government, industry and research representatives. Several knotty problems remain to be sorted out, however. A "balanced" curriculum acceptable to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission as well as the manufacturers must be devised. And a person of independent standing, capable of commanding international respect, must be persuaded to become its director.

Meanwhile, in a separate initiative, the International Nuclear Studies Group is meeting in Geneva this week to consider establishing an International Commission on Nuclear Safety. Modelled on the International Commission on Radiological Protection, the commission would be asked to set universal standards for plant safety.

Peter David