Once the building has been bought, Dr MacLoughlin thinks that further funds will be more readily forthcoming. He is already over-subscribed with potential students and has offers of money from overseas governments. His plan is to take about 40 British and 20–30 overseas students a year, each paying about £6,500 per annum.

Critics of the scheme draw attention to the high cost of providing clinical experience in such medical specialties as neurosurgery and cardiothoracic surgery. But Dr MacLoughlin claims to have many offers from doctors in National Health Service (NHS) hospitals who would be willing to provide teaching facilities. Students would be rotated around different hospitals in the area, returning to Hunter Street for verbal instruction. Dr MacLoughlin is also confident that physicians working outside the NHS would make teaching facilities available, and is not concerned by fears expressed in some quarters that private patients would be unwilling to be guinea pigs for medical students.

Money apart, one major hurdle will be recognition of the school's qualification by the Education Committee of the General Medical Council (GMC), which has statutory powers to monitor and advise on approving medical teaching and examinations. A further snag is the European Community directive that medical education must be supervised by a university. The would-be Hunter School is looking towards the privately-run University of Buckingham, although no formal approach has yet been made.

The university itself has been considering offering pre-medical courses and may later consider collaboration with the Hunter School on pre-clinical teaching. As GMC would have to monitor an entire generation of students before it could approve the Hunter School's course (and the council has no precedent for validating an independent school) approaches have now been made to the ancient Society of Apothecaries, which still has the power to approve names for the medical register.

Despite Dr MacLoughlin's enthusiasm, several independent authories have doubts about the scheme's financial viability and the need for more qualified physicians. The Association of University Teachers has condemned the plans on the grounds that while school-leaving qualifications "have their limitations, the cheque book is not a suitable alternative".

Despite general pessimism about the project's chances of success, the association says it is not taking any chances in the current political climate. Dr Bill Stephenson, of the association's London branch, pointed out that 12 years ago people had thought the idea of an independent university inconceivable. But the University of Buckingham is now chartered to award its own degrees and has the Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham, as its first chancellor.

Tim Beardsley

French patents

Fanning fires of invention

THE French minister of industry and research, M. Laurent Fabius, believes that French genius is not protecting itself sufficiently with patents. So earlier this month, he proposed a 20-point programme to the council of ministers designed to encourage French men and women to embarrass the French patent office — the Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle (INPI) with inventions.

As things are the French balance of payments in royalties is markedly negative. France pays out FF3,500 million (£286 million) each year in royalties on foreign inventions licensed in France. But it receives only FF2,100 million (£171 million) in royalties on French inventions licensed abroad. The net loss of £115 million a year indicates, in Fabius's view, both excessive technological dependence on foreign invention and insufficent French protection.

Analysis of numbers of patents (see figure) speaks equally loudly. In 1980 France granted 10,000 patents to its citizens, and 35,000 — more than three times as many — to foreigners. In Japan, by contrast, 160,000 patents were granted in 1980 to Japanese inventors but only 30,000 to foreign inventors.

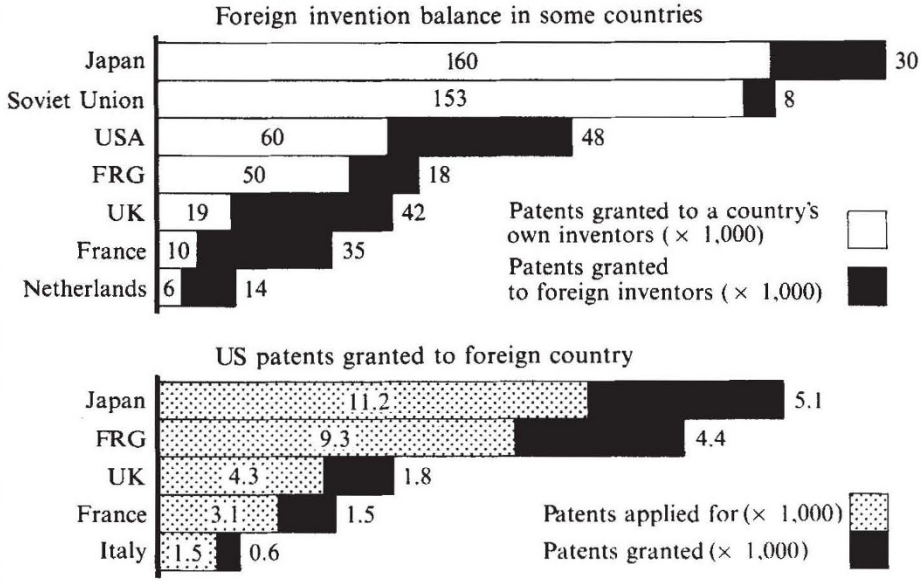
The patenting process in these two countries is roughly comparable. There is essentially no assessment or weeding out of applications in either country — anyone who applies (and pays) receives. By contrast West Germany's system is much more rigorous, so that the 50,000 patents to German nationals and 18,000 to foreigners probably represent a real national advantage. Britain's system falls in rigour between the French and the German and produced 19,000 patents for Britons and 42,000 for foreigners in 1980.

A more objective test involves comparison of the number of US patents granted to certain foreign countries in 1979 (see figure). A study by Sally Wyatt and Luke Soete of the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex appears to show the underlying strength of West Germany in patenting — it follows close behind Japan on these figures — and the relative weakness of other countries in Europe. However, the US patents system is somewhat like the British — an application is examined and judged only if challenged. Thus the apparent patenting strength of a country is the product of a number of factors, high among which is the sheer volume of applications. "The Japanese will patent absolutely anything", Sally Wyatt claims.

But however difficult it is to interpret the data, the SPRU authors argue that they are useful among a clutch of indicators — including, say, research expenditure — which must be taken together to indicate the technological strength of a country. And M. Fabius seems determined to get this particular indicator up.

His 20 proposed measures include: support to small and medium industries to reduce the cost of patenting, now estimated to be FF 150,000 (£12,000) for world rights; free legal advice; research organizations to pay increased grants to groups which deposit patents; new courses on patenting at leading engineering schools (the *grandes écoles*); and a publicity campaign to encourage patenting, to be launched in the autumn. However, he has not been able to propose a reform of French patent law, which is little changed since the revolution.

Robert Walgate



Sources: Top, World Intellectual Property Organization. Bottom, S. Wyatt & L. Soete, Scientometrics, *Vol. 5, 31–54 (1983).*

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