

British higher education

Changing pattern in polytechnics

THE upheaval in British higher education continues. Far-reaching plans for changes in the provision of advanced further education courses outside the universities were sent last week to more than 200 directors of polytechnics and other colleges supported by local authorities. The proposals, which are the result of the first major planning exercise by the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education (NAB), include for the first time provisional cash allocations derived from projected student numbers calculated on the basis of need rather than by tinkering with historic student numbers. Resources for science, engineering and computing courses will all be increased relative to other subject areas.

NAB's planning exercise has been conducted against a background of continuing reductions in the public provision for advanced further education. The provisional student target total for the academic year 1984-85 is a modest increase on the total for the coming year, but because of the high numbers of students now in the first and second years of their courses, between 5,000 and 10,000 new places will be lost compared with present enrolments. Expenditure per full-time student will nevertheless

be substantially reduced.

NAB has tried to balance student demand, geographical variations in the quality of existing provision and the need to increase support for specific kinds of studies. Target student numbers for individual institutions have not been made public, but it seems clear that their fortunes will vary widely. Most of the projected changes in cash allocations from the central pool in 1984-85 are based not on student targets resulting from the planning exercise itself but on a watered-down version arrived at by halving the changes predicated by that exercise. This peculiar "mitigation" procedure, which applies across the board, was a last-minute improvisation meant to soften the blow to institutions that would otherwise be left in a hopeless position. The "mitigation factor" is a remnant of a device used in previous years for the same purpose and will certainly be modified in discussions to be held with colleges and local authorities over the next few weeks in order to make it more selective. NAB's proposals have yet to be endorsed by its board and committee, while central government will not finally decide how much cash there is to spend until the autumn.

The mitigation factor apart, NAB's proposals mean that three or four colleges may have to close or to merge with other institutions — unless they can persuade NAB to change its thinking over the next two weeks.

The need for a degree of coordinated planning to control the rapid growth of the polytechnics and other colleges became apparent during the late 1970s, when the Department of Education and Science, which ultimately foots the bill for such institutions, decided to put an upper limit on the size of the repayment that it would make to local authorities, the titular sponsors. With the change in government in 1979, a scheme was promulgated that led eventually to the formation of NAB in February 1982. NAB's planning exercise is bound to be compared with that of the University Grants Committee in 1981, with the notable difference that NAB has declared openly the criteria it has employed. As well as the shifts of emphasis between subjects, NAB has tried to reverse the trend towards a concentration of higher education places in south-east England.

Mr Cecil Robinson, president of the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education, has described NAB's proposals as "statistical mumbo-jumbo" that has no relation to wider educational issues. His association does not accept the need for an overall contraction, particularly when demand for higher education is increasing. Robinson says the NAB proposals take no account of the increasing demand for education

among those in middle age who have been made redundant. The association will be seeking declarations of support at this week's annual meeting of the Trades Union Congress.

The Committee of Directors of Polytechnics is more cautious in its response but expresses concern about the reduction in expenditure per student which will follow unless the Department of Education and Science has a sudden change of heart. But the polytechnics seemed to have fared better than smaller specialized colleges; two-thirds of them are now being consulted on student totals actually in excess of the number they originally asked for.

Tim Beardsley

French biotechnology

Making a splash

WHATEVER happens in the small print of the French research budget for 1984 (it will probably match inflation but is still being haggled over as part of the whole 1984 government budget), biotechnology seems unlikely to do badly. On Monday, the industry and research minister Laurent Fabius laid the first stone of a new building to be devoted to biotechnology at the Institut Pasteur in Paris and also launched an "international network for biotechnologies", previewed by the Versailles summit. The network will link France with Japan, Britain and Canada, and the whole European Community through Brussels: its secretariat will be in France.

The new building will cost the state FF 60 million (£5 million). The Pasteur — which is private, but about 50 per cent state-supported — will spend a further FF 23 million (£2 million) to equip the six-floor building. The Pasteur's existing biotechnology group (G3, a syndicate which unites the Pasteur with other French research institutions) will occupy one-sixth of the nearly 3,000 square metres of useful laboratory space. Construction work should be completed during 1986, and although the building will be run by the Pasteur, the institute has promised to coordinate its research policies for users of the laboratories with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, INSERM (the medical research council) and INRA (agriculture). The research will straddle the fundamental and the applied, oriented on the one hand to health, and on the other to industry.

As for the international network in biotechnology, that will establish communications among existing and future research centres, and "encourage" joint research programmes. An international committee will develop and control such programmes. President of the network will be Pierre Douzou, who runs the French biotechnology programme at the ministry of research and industry; the British government chemist, R. F. Coleman, will be vice-president.

Robert Walgate

Charities' research

THE total income of the 34 British medical charities that together make up the Association of Medical Research Charities was £115 million for 1983, of which just over £76 million was spent on research. This compares with the figure of £113.7 million allocated to the government-supported Medical Research Council (MRC), of which an estimated £100 million was to be spent on research. Source: Handbook of the Association of Medical Research Charities, 1983 and MRC Annual Report 1981-82. □

