

British universities

Shrunken system told to grow

LORD Flowers, newly-installed chairman of the British Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, presided over his first meeting last week — and immediately found himself in an unexpected dilemma. The Department of Education and Science has called the bluff of universities that have been protesting about student quotas imposed by the University Grants Committee (UGC), and has asked them to take on more students. The catch is that they will not be given extra UGC funds to provide for them.

The request was made to UGC earlier this month, and the committee has now written to British universities asking if they would be able to accommodate the department's wishes. The government wants universities to admit an extra 5,000 home and EEC students in the academic years 1984–85 and 1985–86, preferably to read vocational and technological subjects. These years correspond to an expected demographic peak in student demand, although the vice-chancellors dispute the government's projections of how rapidly demand will fall thereafter.

Lord Flowers has responded cautiously to the request, saying that universities would try to accommodate the extra students where this could be achieved without lowering standards, but has insisted that it must be for individual universities to make the decisions. Their responses are not expected until the end of the month.

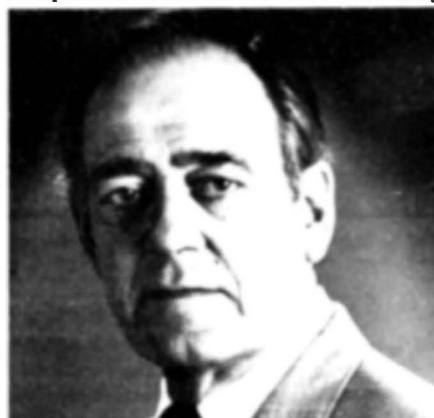
The number of extra students requested is an increase of 7 per cent of the planned intake for the period, and some doubt whether universities will be willing to bend quite this far to broaden educational opportunities. The emphasis on vocational subjects is likely to be especially difficult, since these are usually the most expensive to provide for. As provision per full-time student is under threat in any case, many universities may feel more inclined to protect what they already have. Several universities are also annoyed that such short notice has been given, especially as some were "fined" by UGC for overshooting their quotas last year.

This latest twist in the fortunes of British universities follows hard on the heels of a request to UGC by Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, that universities should consider what would be the effects if the level of provision per student were progressively reduced by 1½ per cent a year for the remainder of the decade.

The committee of vice chancellors — which can do little more than make noises when it comes to money matters — says its members are prepared to consider even this request, but warns that the consequences could be "grave" if the run-down proceeds any faster. The rapid budget reductions of

the past few years, though they had produced an increase in efficiency, had also introduced diseconomies, with the result that some departments now have fewer students than they might. But because reductions in recurrent grants were accompanied by recommendations that had the effect of protecting science at the expense of other subjects, at least part of the spare capacity is in the very subjects the government does not want to expand.

Lord Flowers stressed last week that British universities have now given up the idea that they are all equal, and the key word, for the next few years at least, will be diversity. But the committee is unwilling to accept that universities should be officially



Lord Flowers: no money for increased quotas

categorized according to the amount of research they maintain. It is also "very unhappy" with the suggestion that some universities might concentrate on two-year courses for some subjects, and feels that the pressure to concentrate more on science and technology may undervalue the economic importance of non-vocational subjects.

The desire of the department of education and science for more students is probably not unconnected with the fact that the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education has recently concluded a planning exercise that will lead to a reduction in the number of students admitted to polytechnics and other colleges of higher education. Recent statistics on admissions to universities show that more suitably qualified applicants are being disappointed, a matter which has been the cause of some political embarrassment.

British universities are now caught in a cleft stick: they do not want to appear to refuse opportunities to potential students, but at the same time, as Dr John Burnett, vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, pointed out, over the next ten years many buildings will reach the end of their useful lives. If universities are too accommodating now, they may find themselves in a worse position at the start of the 1990s, when student demand will start to fall substantially.

Tim Beardsley

Military beam research

Stanford deals with Pentagon

Washington

A PROPOSAL to conduct a weapons-related research project at the Stanford Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory (SSRL) that earlier this year provoked a storm of protest from some Stanford faculty staff and students (see *Nature* 301, p.645) has now been approved by the laboratory's director.

Under the terms announced last week by the director, Dr Arthur Bienenstock, the most directly applied aspects of the work, involving calibration of X-ray detectors for use in nuclear weapons tests, will be carried out at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory rather than at Stanford as originally proposed. SSRL will also require the researchers to give up one-third of the time on two new beam lines that they will construct at the laboratory to general users of the facility. In accordance with a long-standing Stanford policy, none of the work will be classified.

Some of the strongest opposition to the project had been voiced by staff and faculty at Stanford's Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC), which supplies the electron source for SSRL. Last January, 15 SLAC faculty and 180 staff members signed a petition opposing the project on the grounds that they were being "held captive" to work that they did not wish to be a part of. Four of the five SLAC staff who work on the storage ring that feeds SSRL said this summer that they would ask to be transferred if the project were approved.

A second petition circulated throughout Stanford last spring garnered signatures from 2,000 students and 50 faculty members in opposition to the project.

In announcing his approval of the project, Bienenstock affirmed the earlier conclusion of Stanford president Donald Kennedy and the university's Committee on Research that research projects should be accepted or rejected solely on their scientific merits, without regard to their possible end uses. An SSRL review panel that must approve all proposed research at the facility had earlier endorsed the project.

Lawrence Livermore, Sandia and Los Alamos National Laboratories, together with the University of California, will be jointly responsible for the project. The group is requesting \$5.4 million from the Department of Energy's Office of Military Applications to construct the two new beam lines at SSRL; the University of California has agreed to pitch in \$1 million. The weapons laboratories are requesting the energy department to provide a further \$1 million to improve facilities at Livermore so that the calibration work can be carried out there.

The Department of Energy-supported portion of the project will address three