

French education

Broadening the base for PhDs

ARE French universities in danger of becoming second-rate? Is French socialism driving an even deeper wedge between the universities and the elite *grandes écoles*, so increasing social divisions? Those are the fears of many university staff in France, who dread among other proposals of the present government the suggestion that the *grandes écoles* should be able to grant PhDs.

The one thing that has given the universities an edge over the *grandes écoles*, and a degree of pride, is that the former are, by and large, the only places to do research. Although the *grandes écoles* (engineering schools which are a legacy of Napoleon) train the cream of the French administration and business communities, and although competition for places in them dominates French education from primary schools upwards, they have until recently been content to leave research mostly to the universities.

But the present administration has been encouraging more *grandes écoles* to carry out research, like the military *Ecole Polytechnique* which already does important research in mathematics and physics (and which has recently entered biology). And now consideration is being given to allowing them to grant the new PhD research degree, a right won only this academic year by the universities as a replacement for their unwieldy *troisième cycle* and *d'état* degrees.

If the *grandes écoles* are able to award PhDs, some university staff argue, they will cream off all the best research students, leaving the university system, which is open to all comers, badly depleted.

The government's arguments are, however, pragmatic and clear. The *grandes écoles* are so well established in French society that they cannot be destroyed. And while they are training the French elite, it is better that they should train them in research. The French administration considers that one of the principal weaknesses of French industry is a lack of research experience at higher management levels. But there is a tendency among the *grandes écoles* students to despise the universities.

"The number of people in industry with research degrees is ridiculously low", says Bernard Descompes, director of research at the ministry of education. "Only 5 per cent of graduates (*ingénieurs*) of *grandes écoles* try to get doctorates, mostly in universities." That is 500 people out of an output of some 12,000 *grandes écoles* graduates a year, and of these only 100 end up in industrial laboratories, Descompes estimates.

"The best solution would be for the two sectors to set up cooperative research and teaching", says Descompes, "but the two systems won't join." The *grandes écoles* and universities seem like oil and water.

Thus the possible solution arises, to let the *grandes écoles* themselves grant PhDs. *Grandes écoles* such as those at Grenoble, Nancy and Toulouse that already have tendencies in that direction would be developed as technical universities.

M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, leader of the Ceres left-wing faction of the socialist party and currently minister of education, seems to have no objection to such a development. M. Chevènement has recently given

French a new term, "*élitisme républicain*". It means, essentially, "to each according to his or her ability", whatever a person's social class. Chevènement has no wish to remove the *grandes écoles*: his logic is to strengthen them, but to remove social barriers to entry. But the *grandes écoles* are small institutions (there are a million students in French universities, twenty times the number at *grandes écoles*). If the *grandes écoles* cream off the best one-twentieth of research at French universities, will French science die or will it be invigorated? The experiment may be interesting.

Robert Walgate

US scholarships

Scholarship diplomacy booms

Washington

DESPITE proposed cutbacks in financial support for domestic students, assistance for foreign nationals studying and training in the United States is to be sharply increased. The contrast is in part explained by the circumstances that, according to one count, 33 heads of state and 450 cabinet ministers worldwide have at some time studied in the United States. The long-term influence of this "scholarship diplomacy" is reckoned to be considerable. Scholarships for students from developing countries offered by the Agency for International Development (AID) will increase by 50 per cent next year, to 15,000, and the US Information Agency will have doubled funds for its Fulbright grants for visiting students and scholars over the past four years. And there is probably still more to come.

A resurgence of congressional interest in assistance programmes for foreign students seems to have halted a long period of decline. While Soviet bloc educational programmes (excluding Cuba) tripled between 1972 and 1982, US scholarships declined by over 50 per cent over the same period. The executive branch, which tried to make further cutbacks in foreign student assistance during President Reagan's first term, now seems persuaded of their value.

Announcing the expanded AID programme, the agency's administrator, Peter McPherson, noted that in 1982 there were seven Soviet bloc scholarships for every one in the United States. The new AID effort will therefore be directed selectively at politically sensitive regions, particularly at disadvantaged students in Central America. Eventually, it is hoped that AID and the Information Agency could bring 10,000 Central American students to the United States each year.

The expansion of the AID participation training programme has been achieved largely by slimming down the agency's administration. The programme supports students in both training and "academic" courses. In 1983, 45 per cent of recipients were classed as taking academic courses. Over 60 per cent of students come from Africa and the Middle East. The new

expansion will for the first time allow the agency to support students on undergraduate courses, as well as the traditional training and postgraduate courses. The main focus will remain on development, however. There are also plans for collaboration with industry and universities, some of which reduce tuition fees for deserving cases.

The US Information Agency's Fulbright programme has benefited from the 1982 Pell amendment, which required a doubling of the Fulbright budget over four years. This target is likely to be met. The number of visiting students and scholars has now



reached the 2,000 mark after sinking to fewer than 1,500 a few years ago. Another award scheme run by the information agency chiefly for mid-career professionals, the Humphrey Fellowship scheme, is also now being expanded.

The outlook for foreign students in the United States is not so rosy for the great majority who are paying their own way, however. The high value of the dollar is being blamed for a marked slowing of the annual growth in numbers of foreign students. Tuition fees and living expenses commonly exceed \$20,000 a year. There is concern in some quarters that US academic institutions could be severely affected if foreign graduate students, in particular, stop coming. In many institutions, more than half of postgraduate students are foreigners, and they constitute an essential talent pool for faculty recruitment.

Tim Beardsley