US universities

Now even the Texans are short of cash

Austin, Texas

TEXAN ambition is legendary, and the state's two major campuses, the University of Texas (UT) at Austin and Texas A & M University at College Station, certainly fit into that mould. Both aspire to be counted among the country's top research institutions before the end of the century, and both can point to impressive steps already taken towards that goal, including the well-publicised poaching of academic superstars from better-known and more widely celebrated institutions. But a state budget crisis is casting a shadow over the universities' finances — both are state supported — and faculty recruitment and teaching programmes may suffer as a result.

The Texan economy has been built on oil. Since oil prices started to fall two years ago there have been growing numbers of business failures, and property prices have fallen, sometimes dramatically. State tax revenues have also fallen, and because the state legislature is constitutionally prevented from running a budget deficit it now has to find ways of reducing spending by almost \$1,000 million (the alternative, raising tax rates, seems too unpopular even to contemplate in Texas). The first proposal for achieving this saving, drafted against a deadline and hardly intended to be taken seriously, would have done so entirely by reducing the state's higher education budget by a startling 29 per cent. The most recent proposals are more moderate — it seems to be agreed that the 1986 higher education appropriation should not be less than 96 per cent of that for 1985 — but the state House of Representatives appropriations committee has nevertheless approved a plan to close down the UT Permian Basin campus and the A & M campus at Galveston. While this will not be the last word on the plan, it indicates how seriously the crisis is now being taken.

Many fear that even small cutbacks will damage the Texas "can do" reputation, which is held to be the major reason why both universities have been so successful in building first class academic departments. Eight UT Austin PhD programmes were ranked among the top ten in the country by a recent national survey, and A & M claims to be among the top 20 US universities in research expenditure. The chancellor of the UT system is on record as saying that support at 96 per cent of 1985 levels will be insufficient to keep academic programmes at their current levels, however, and the university is still pressing for a 4.9 per cent increase. The funding decisions by the legislature are supposed by law to be decided by midnight of 31 May;

this year many expect the legislature to resort to the device (used on some previous occasions) of literally turning back the chamber's clock to gain extra time.

The state budget crunch is doubly unfortunate because it comes at the same time as legislative changes that will reduce the benefits accruing to UT Austin and Texas A & M from a massive land endowment granted by the state last century. The 2 million acres of west Texas that were set aside to support scholarship were later found to lie above substantial oil deposits, and it is principally the oil that has supported the extraordinary expansion of both institutions since the 1920s. Royalties are channelled into a Permanent University Fund, now worth around \$2,000 million; interest from the permanent fund constitutes the Available University Fund, amounting to about \$150 million a year. The universities use the permanent fund to guarantee loans for new building construction, and interest on this bonded indebtedness is the first call made on the available fund.

In a ballot last November, the state increased the number of campuses eligible to use the Permanent University Fund to guarantee loans, to include virtually all UT and A & M campuses; this privilege had previously extended only to a few sites, principally the large College Station and Austin campuses. The result will be that more of the available fund will be tied up servicing debts and so proportionately less will be available for other improvements at the main campuses.

Despite the squeeze, both universities have more to be cheerful about than most: UT's total endowments are by some reckonings worth more even than those of Harvard, generally thought to be the wealthiest university in the country. And the president of Texas A & M, Frank Vandiver, is adamant that state budget problems will not impede plans to recruit top quality faculty: top salaries can be paid to attract the right people (there are two faculty members earning over \$100,000 a year) can be paid to attract the right people, and, even more important, the university will provide buildings and equipment beyond the means of many institutions. The success of A & M in becoming the scientific headquarters of the Ocean Drilling Program is ascribed largely to Vandiver's personal commitment to provide \$5 million of university funds for a new building for the programme, the first on the university's research park. A & M is also making a strong pitch to attract the proposed Superconducting Supercollider to Texas, to which end it has already devoted \$1 million.

Perils of secrecy

Washington

THE Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), which exists to advise Congress on technical matters, has discovered one of the pitfalls of working with classified documents. The office was recently commissioned by a congressional committee to prepare a report on "C3I" — command, control, communications and intelligence of nuclear forces. OTA's researcher was provided with the appropriate security clearances; the final report was to be classified.

After poring over Department of Defense (DoD) documents, OTA's researcher wrote his report and submitted it to DoD for security review. DoD promptly slapped on it a classification even higher than the level for which the researcher had had clearance. The classification is also higher than congressmen are ever allowed. So now neither OTA nor the committee that commissioned the study is allowed to read it.

The explanation is that the OTA researcher apparently pulled together enough top secret and "compartmentalized" data (one step above top secret — those with access to any given compartment are not given access to any others or even permitted to know what other compartments exist) to reproduce some of DoD's most secret data on nuclear war-fighting plans, which have a security classification all their own.

OTA officials have suggested outfitting their researcher with a blindfold to allow him to remove the offending passages.

Stephen Budiansky

At UT Austin, recruitment is now under way to fill 32 new scientific professorial chairs, each carrying an endowment of \$1 million. Last year, the university accepted \$16 million in private donations for the chairs and was able to match this sum from the Available University Fund; the first appointments have now been announced. The 32 chairs will be in natural sciences and engineering, with a strong emphasis on molecular biology and materials sciences, reflecting the university's desire to serve the economic needs of society, according to Austin Gleeson, dean of the college of natural sciences. Some faculties outside the favoured areas are resentful of what they see as a lack of consultation by the university on where the money should be spent. But Gerhard Fonken, Dean of academic affairs, argues that when a single gift of \$8 million is being discussed it is well to bear the donor's wishes in mind. The first of the 32 appointments have recently been announced, but already there are worrying signs that some scientists who have been approached are being deterred by reports about the state legislature's early proposals for higher education spending. The view at Austin is still firmly optimistic; talk of faculty lay-offs is dismissed as scaremongering.

Tim Beardsley