

## West German universities

SIR—Your article on West German universities (*Nature* 316, 96; 1985) only reflects part of the actual situation.

The concept of “shifting balance within the university committees to a wider group” was indeed an integral part of the university reform that was rushed through some *Länder* parliaments in the early 1970s, without consulting academic staff. The anti-industry attitude then prevailing also led to the institutionalization of rigorous limitations on *Drittmittelforschung*, that is, industry-supported research. The idea was to reduce if not abolish access of individual staff members to research funds, and to ensure control of all departmental activities by “democratic” committees that were usually dominated by extreme left-wing activists.

The new legislation required all decisions concerning such divergent matters as professional appointments, finance, extension of contracts of laboratory assistants or undergraduate courses to be arrived at by majority vote in “democratic” committees. The resulting meetings occupied a considerable part of the staff's time — up to 90 hours per month was not unusual. Plans to abolish individual examinations as relics of capitalist exploitation and to accept examination papers produced by teams of comrades, so that the strong could support the weak, have been seriously discussed in this context.

This led to a decrease in research activities and further weakened the potential of German universities which had suffered from the exodus during the early years of Nazism, from twelve years of dictatorial rule and persecution and from the war. It is no accident that research papers from German universities are only rarely found in the pages of *Nature*, while the independent Max-Planck Institutes (MPIs) are now the main source of internationally recognized research in Germany. The same applies to the job situation — openings advertised in *Nature* are usually in MPIs and not in universities.

You refer to professorships that “were distributed too readily during the years of expansion”; the years of expansion were the 1960s, when common sense still prevailed; ready distribution of professorships took place under the new university regulations when pressure from the non-professional majorities on committees resulted, for instance, in the University of Hamburg elevating 400 lecturers to professors (not on merit!) by a single decree.

This is why prospects for promotion in universities are now discouraging and why the scientific standard of professors in “reformed” German universities does not compare favourably with the United Kingdom.

Let me conclude by saying that my friends in British universities are invariably horrified when they learn about the new German “system”, which, in recent years, has also been adopted in my native Austria. A head of department is now a mere figurehead who has to maintain the goodwill of the powerful departmental committee by populist measures or by bowing to the majority of the less-qualified. A more appropriate title for your article would thus have been “Is there still hope for German universities?” — by dropping the unrealistic and unproductive “plans for change” before it is too late. Isolation from the international scientific community and lowering of standards in teaching and research would otherwise be inevitable.

E.F. STUMPF

*Institute of Mineralogy  
and Petrology,  
Mining University,  
A-8700 Leoben, Austria*

## Prizes for Germany

SIR—When Klaus von Klitzing said (see *Nature* 317, 667; 1985) that he hoped it would not be another 22 years before a West German won a Nobel prize (for physics), he was *not* referring to the prize awarded that long ago to the Munich physicist Mössbauer, but to the Heidelberg physicist J. Hans Jensen (1907–1973), who shared the Nobel prize for physics in 1963 with Maria Goeppert-Mayer, La Jolla (one half of the prize, the other half was awarded to Eugen Wigner, Princeton). Rudolf Mössbauer, München, shared the Nobel prize for physics 1961 with Robert Hofstadter, Stanford.

ROSWITHA SCHMID

*Naturwissenschaftliche Rundschau,  
Postfach 40,  
D-7000 Stuttgart 1, FRG*

## UK physics

SIR—I read “Sociological problems of high-energy physics” (*Nature* 318, 243; 1985) with interest but with some dismay, as I did not entirely recognize the field in which I work from the text. The article indulges happily in unsupported generalizations, and hypotheses based on speculations by the gurus of long ago. Perhaps from their American viewpoint they do not see the vitality and innovation of the field over here. Nobody looking at the L3 and DELPHI experiments at LEP could consider them as conservative. Even a project such as OPAL, founded on the premise that it must work reliably from turn-on, is benefiting every day from the individual initiative and innovation of its younger members.

The “10–25 per cent heterodox research” advocated in the article is thriving in the United Kingdom (see the 1984 Rutherford Annual Report for a full list) but will have to diminish if the cuts recommended in the Kendrew report are inflicted.

There is a sociological problem in high-energy physics, certainly in the United Kingdom, forced on us by the persistent negativism of our paymasters. First-rate researchers leave the field, for lack of career advancement, and young people are discouraged from entering as the number of posts is whittled down. (The breathing space afforded by the Science and Engineering Council's New Blood schemes is now over.) This is occurring at a time when the country desperately needs scientists who have been trained in making their mark in a European environment. British industry is not going to be helped by seeking artificially sheltered conditions in which to train our best researchers.

It is fashionable to decry high-energy physics now. Let us not be misled. In spite of official discouragement, the field remains a vital and exciting one in which to work.

D.H. SAXON

*16 Membury Way,  
Grove, Wantage,  
Oxfordshire OX12 0RP, UK*

## AFRC cuts

SIR—Over the past few years you have given detailed consideration to the financial problems of the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC), culminating in your report of the severity of the latest cuts at this institute (*Nature* 317, 663; 1985).

It is not, however, generally appreciated that the extensive cuts at the Institute for Research on Animal Diseases include the savaging of the molecular biology department, which was set up some four years ago to introduce genetic manipulation and allied techniques to the institute's research programme. In view of the stated commitment of AFRC to a programme of modern biology, one would have expected maintenance or even expansion of this programme.

On the contrary, the number of permanent scientific staff in the department has declined at a faster rate than that of the institute staff as a whole. At a time when molecular biology has expanded elsewhere, it is strange that the opposite should be true of AFRC's restructuring plans at this institute.

G. D. HUNTER

*(Chairman, AFRC Higher Grades Panel,  
Institute of Professional Civil Servants)  
ARC Institute for Research  
on Animal Diseases, Compton,  
near Newbury, Berkshire RG21 0NN, UK*