

that they are financially uneconomic and will recommend that they should be abolished or amalgamated. UGC will regret, like the institutions concerned, that universities thus deprived will hardly meet the classical concept of the university.

Especially under its present enlightened management, there is no reason to believe that UGC wants to become what it is well on the way to being — every British academic's dean's office. Nor can Baker seek the kind of centralization now being forced on the system by financial stringency. He should know that there is a respectable way out, one that would get the government out of the business of setting the specific goals by which universities conduct themselves. He would be nudged in that direction if the committee now looking at UGC's own function, due to report in the next twelve months, recommends regretfully that UGC should be abolished.

But how could British universities survive without UGC? By being challenged with the offer of the autonomy of which they boast. It is now five years since they were told (by UGC) that they would be penalized financially if they exceeded certain student numbers; the threat of penalty has been lifted, but target student numbers remain the basis on which UGC allocations are calculated. One result is that successful universities cannot grow as quickly as they might, while less successful institutions are kept in being, at least in the short run, by continuing subventions. The prospect, as UGC enforces rationalization for sound economic reasons, is that many of these institutions will become lop-sided places, covering only part of the ground of scholarship and thus even less suitable for, and probably even less attractive to, potential students. The truth is that British universities are, on the average, too small for the smaller among them to be complete. Their size probably makes them uneconomic as well. The general interest would be served by amalgamation, for which, under present arrangements, there is no incentive.

But how could autonomy be afforded? Curiously, the financial problem is not nearly as insurmountable as it may seem. A third of the UGC budget is reckoned to cover research support, leaving £1,000 million a year in round numbers for the support of other academic functions in universities. Public funds are channelled to institutions of higher education in the form of tuition fees fixed far below average or even marginal cost. Although local authorities administer the system, central government meets the cost. So why not allow tuition fees to rise again (they were arbitrarily cut four years ago when Baker's predecessor feared they would partly protect some universities from the penalties for quota-breaking), meeting the cost from the central budget of UGC? If managed over a predetermined period of time, and coupled with the understanding that students would choose between universities, the result would be both autonomy and a measure of competition between institutions at present persuaded that they must all sink together.

But, Baker's civil servants will ask, what assurance will there then be that the universities are publicly accountable? How will it be possible to tell that academics are indeed carrying out a modicum of research, or that they are taking full account of citation counts in promoting their own members to more senior posts? These questions are of course irrelevant. If the universities were financially autonomous, dependent on public funds only indirectly through the preferences of students for courses of study and for places at which to follow them, the universities would have an incentive which they at present lack to manage their affairs efficiently. They would also have an incentive towards diversity, of which Britain has too little. The endless quarrel with the government about tenure as universities came to put their institutional survival before the interests of individuals would end. Some might even discover that they need not stick slavishly to UGC "norms" for the number of students per member of teaching staff any more than they are compelled to follow UGC standards for the equipment of buildings. To be sure, in such a regime, only the better universities would prosper. Is there anything wrong with that? □

Research in trouble

Mr Baker's little extra has also created a dilemma in which leaving CERN may be the only choice.

THE research half of the British academic enterprise will be hardly better pleased than the university part with last week's events. Outwardly, the research councils will have an extra £39 million to spend next year, over and above inflation, or more than 6 per cent of total public support for basic research. One immediate snag is that £14 million of the extra offered last week was also offered just under a year ago by Sir Keith Joseph, and has long since been counted on by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) on whose advice the sum available is eventually divided among the five research councils. Another and more serious difficulty is that the British basic research enterprise is yet again in the throes of a crisis thrust upon it by circumstances over which it has no control. Sterling has once again depreciated, with the result that the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), which must find from its budget international subscriptions to organizations such as CERN, the European high-energy physics laboratory, is short of roughly £20 million, nearly a quarter of what it spends each year on research grants to academics. ABRC will have a stark choice at its two meetings later this month: either give the whole of Mr Baker's extra money to the research council in most urgent need of it, letting the others smoulder in penury for another year, or invite SERC to face a decision that has been staring it in the face for the past three years, whether to pull out of CERN.

It is a curious state of affairs. Except for 1980, when sterling appreciated against European currencies (and SERC's predecessor spent its windfall gain on extra equipment grants for universities), the crisis is chronic. Nobody is astonished, for sterling is a steadily depreciating currency. To saddle the research councils with this perpetual difficulty is of course unfair; while the international organizations to which SERC subscribes have scientific objectives, the government also has a political interest in their continuation. With its new policy on space research, the British government would not readily agree to a decision of SERC to save its annual subscription to the European Space Agency by pulling out of that. British membership of CERN is a political matter for different reasons; the British government has an interest in seeming no less faithful a European state than its competitors. But, with the exception of a single year when the Treasury was persuaded to do the decent thing, there has been no occasion in the past decade when the research councils have been adequately bailed out. Members of the council's peer review committees meeting in the past few weeks to consider new grant applications have been startled to be told that SERC is £20 million short, for which reason it may be necessary to postpone the dates at which some successful applications become effective. Of necessity, the grants postponed will be those that can be put off practically; they may well include the more promising projects, which is no way to run a research enterprise already low on morale.

This is why withdrawal from CERN is yet again a live issue. ABRC's own inquiry under Sir John Kendrew concluded that it would be better, first, to negotiate a reduced budget (or British contribution), which is now the purpose of a study by CERN members due to be completed next year. It would be discourteous to pull out before that review is completed, but SERC may have no choice. The way things have turned out in Britain, with the research community persuaded that the future is only bleak, the decision may not matter much. But if there is a chance of rescuing something from the British enterprise, it is more important to give a few young people with bright ideas a chance to turn them into reality than to continue membership of even such a splendid organization as CERN. But if SERC goes down that road, it should promise itself and its constituents that it will also look hard at the need for all of its own domestic facilities. □