

More money rows for academics

In what seems certain to be another year of introspection, British universities will have to take a more open view on the future pattern of student support.

THOSE who have just swum the English Channel are rarely pleased to be told that they must turn round and swim back again. That is how the British university system will consider it is being dealt with, in the political year now beginning. After the trauma of the Education Reform Bill, when universities lost the right to offer teachers indefinite tenure but successfully won concessions in the cause of academic freedom, they might have expected a breathing-spell. Instead, they will find that their paymaster, the British government, is looking for a continuation of what it calls reform by administrative rather than legislative means. Having reshaped the mechanisms by which public subventions of the system are disbursed (the University Grants Committee will indeed be replaced by the Universities Funding Council next April, for example), the government is bent on redistributing the amounts of money available under different headings. But, on this occasion, the university system may better the situation in which it finds itself if it plays its cards well, and may even win back some of the freedom lost in recent years.

There are three sources of public support for British universities. First, there is a general subvention of £1,860 million (this year) channelled through the University Grants Committee, of which a third is reckoned to cover the infrastructure of research. Second, there is the so-called Science Budget, £670 this year, most of which is channelled through the research councils as research grants, services on behalf of university research in general and stipends for graduate students; this chunk of the budget is controlled by the Department of Education and Science (DES) on the advice of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC). Third, there is spending in respect of university tuition fees and maintenance grants for undergraduates channelled through local governments, which pay fees for and maintenance grants to students in approved higher education courses according to rules laid down by DES, which reimburses local authorities.

In the university sector, tuition fees account for roughly £120 million a year, and maintenance grants to students for perhaps £250 million a year. The total is far from insignificant. Now that the legislative dust has settled, it is natural that all interested parties should be asking whether the same money spent differently might yield a better system.

Inclinations

On one point, the government's inclinations are already plain. Mr Kenneth Baker, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, has been hinting that he would welcome a transfer of funds from institutional to research support, or from UGC to the research councils. The effect would be to end what the British call the 'dual-support' system, in which universities finance the continuing capability of departments for research and the research councils support special projects. So deeply ingrained is the system that the idea that it might be abandoned was first canvassed only six years ago in a joint UGC-ABRC study, although UGC's more recent scheme to skew general university support towards departments with good records in research means that some are now distinctly more equal than others.

But there are two clear dangers in the wholehearted pursuit of

this policy. First, universities whose general support covers only their teaching will be less able to encourage newly promising departments to embark on adventures in research. Second, a transfer of funds will not mean that the research councils will be able to support more research projects; they will merely become enmeshed in haggles about the level of overhead payments.

The other budget point on which the government's attention is riveted is its mechanism for supporting students. Britain stands out among otherwise comparable countries in its general undertaking to feed and house students in higher education. That it does so in a niggardly fashion, with maintenance grants too small to keep body and soul together even when they are not reduced below the maximum (often to zero) by a calculation of a student's parents' income, does not prevent it claiming to be generous. But the practice has come to seem increasingly anomalous as British prosperity has been restored. Although British students are less able than elsewhere to help support themselves with part-time earnings, it must surely be sensible to ask whether the university system could be better managed if the relatively large sum of £250 million, or even a large part of it, were differently spent.

This is where there are opportunities. DES is not well-placed to engineer a substantial change of policy without assistance. So much is clear from the drubbing Sir Keith Joseph, Baker's predecessor, received from his own supporters when he tried to introduce a scheme that would have required well-to-do parents not only to maintain their offspring in higher education but also to pay nominal tuition fees. There is little sign that the government's own supporters have been weaned from their dependence on student maintenance and nominal university fees. Nor, for that matter, have academics, who regard the continuation of the present system as a necessary assurance, in a hard world, that there will be students to teach.

In reality, it is now probably safe to calculate differently. The British national interest and that of the university system coincide at one point, that there should be an increase in the proportion of young people in higher education so as the better to simulate the performance of the United States and Japan. The British government would more readily agree if it were not, under present rules, required to pay maintenance awards to students. So is there some way in which this small part of the whole cake can be resliced so as to give the universities more freedom and flexibility while increasing the chance that young people from poor families, already under-represented in higher education, will be more ready to follow higher education courses? One obvious component is to use part of the money for schemes for scholarship assistance administered by universities, not by the government or local authorities. Partly so as to meet the cost, but also as a matter of equity, there should also be a system of student loans. Hitherto, the opposition has been grounded on the view that loans are inequitable, and a disincentive for poor students. But circumstances have changed, and British universities have no way of telling how much academic business they are now losing because there is no realistic way in which students can win a professional education for themselves except through the mechanisms of the welfare state. □