

UK universities request £183m

London

BRITISH university vice-chancellors last week asked the government for an extra £183 million over the next two years to help recruit and retain high quality staff and put an end to the pay dispute with academics, now into its fourth week.

The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), asked for £64 million for 1989–90 and £119 million for 1990–91. This would finance a 6 per cent pay rise for all academic staff and leave some extra money to raise salaries in areas where there is a staff shortage and to reward staff of outstanding merit.

Academic salaries have fallen by more than 20 per cent relative to average earnings since 1979, said Richmond, in a letter to Kenneth Baker, the Secretary of State for Education. The CVCP has already offered staff a 3.5 per cent pay increase for this year but it recognizes that this is inadequate. If this offer cannot be improved, salaries will fall by a further 5–6 per cent in 1989, says Richmond, and to pay competitive salaries, numbers will have to be cut. The Association of University Teachers (AUT) has criticized the CVCP request, pointing out that even if this money is forthcoming, pay will still be 20 per cent behind average earnings relative to 1979 levels. It demands a substantial increase in basic pay levels, not just rewards to certain groups and individuals.

A survey for the CVCP has shown that 36 per cent of professorial posts and 19 per cent of lectureships were vacant last year. Recruitment of professors was particularly difficult in mathematics, accountancy, electrical engineering and computing. For lecturers, it was also difficult in general science, engineering and business studies.

The CVCP wants to add three discretionary salary points to the top of the lecturer pay scale to avoid having to promote to senior lecturer, which it says is unnecessarily expensive.

The committee also asked for £28 million for payment of overheads on research contracts. Because earnings from research councils and charities have increased, the University Grants Committee can no longer comply with its own instruction that universities should receive 40 per cent in overheads on research contracts, said Richmond. It also wants to increase technicians' salaries. In 1986, they were paid 18 per cent below market rates, and by April this shortfall will be 27 per cent.

The AUT boycott continues to disrupt examinations throughout the country; mid-session examinations are being cancelled and papers for summer examinations are not being set.

Christine McGourty

West German biochemistry institute set ablaze by "viruses"

Munich

MOLECULAR biologists in West Germany have been sleeping uneasily since 2 January, when arsonists broke into a laboratory in Darmstadt and started a fire that caused damage estimated at DM1.5 million.

Authorities say that the early-morning attack on the biochemistry institute of the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt was the work of an 'autonomous' group thought to be loosely affiliated with the terrorist Red Army Faction. Because of the possible terrorist connection, the case is being investigated by the federal prosecutor-general. The only clue to the identity of the criminals is a letter, post-marked in Frankfurt, that was sent to news organizations.

In the letter, the "angry viruses" (*zornige Viren*) — a previously unknown group — take responsibility for the attack. The letter, written in a convoluted style, calls genetic engineering a tool of Western imperialism used to exploit the developing world. The use of such techniques in agriculture, says the letter, is directly related to the "programmed starvation" of subsistence farmers. Human genetics and reproductive technologies are the "definitive attempt" to subject the fertility of women to masculine exploitation and control.

The director of the biochemistry institute, H. G. Gassen, is singled out in the letter as a "clever propagandist of genetic engineering". Gassen had become known

locally as the initiator of a university-industry consortium for pharmaceutical research. The letter accuses Gassen of trying to increase public acceptance of genetic engineering by acknowledging specific criticisms but defending the research in general.

The attack is the latest in a series of assaults on research institutes and private companies that use molecular biology techniques. Earlier attacks have been reported in West Berlin, Cologne, Braunschweig, Münster, Hannover and Heidelberg.

The West German press and the public have expressed strong reservations about genetic engineering in recent years. West German police have alerted other private and public research institutes of the danger of a possible repeat attack.

Gassen, whose work involves the development of synthetic enzymes for diagnostic purposes, says he will not let himself be intimidated by the attackers. "That's just what they want — for us to perform our research in secret behind locked doors. We refuse to play their game." The fires were set in four places on the sixth floor of the biochemistry institute using bags of gasoline hooked to a welding kit and a timing device. Gassen's isotope laboratory was left coated with soot and will be unusable for at least three months.

The fire would have endangered "ten years of research", says Gassen, but it was extinguished by the fire department before it could do more damage.

Steven Dickman

Seasonal greetings at high dilution



THE Department of Pharmacology at the Free University of Amsterdam follows the practice of commissioning a solstitial greetings card from its two newest members. This year's card is reproduced above. □