

Monetary Fund to bridge poor countries' debts. The trouble with that arrangement is that it is slow. The time-scale of debt reduction may not be much shorter than that of global change. Now that the members of the Paris club (next year, it is Washington) have been persuaded of the possibility of the latter, should they not have a greater sense of urgency to clear their desks of the former? □

University follies

British universities are in for another upheaval, this time in the cause of competition and accountability.

AFTER eight years of rapid change, British academics have been looking forward to a period of recuperation. But they will be disappointed. Last year's education act may have emerged from the British Parliament innocent of the distasteful clauses that would have allowed the newly-created Universities Funding Council (UFC) to require that universities should be bound by formal contracts to provide educational services in return for the public funds which they receive, but the universities should have guessed that the government would push its new council as far as possible in that direction. This is what has now happened. The UFC seems bent on creating a market in university education, one that will have to be managed at the beginning, at least.

This, it seems, is how the scheme will function. Later in the year, each university will be sent a letter describing the new arrangements that will include a notional cost for educating people in different fields. Physicists, no doubt, will be more expensive than economists, but not nearly as costly as medical students. Universities will then be invited to bid for allocations of student places that the UFC will be willing to support, possibly increasing their chances (and their intake of students) by arguing that the economies of scale will allow them to teach more for less (per head). The scheme is to be introduced from the beginning of August 1991 (when the universities' financial year begins); the UFC hopes to manage the transition to a kind of market in student numbers within four years, ending in 1995. From the beginning of the period, the general subvention of research costs (perhaps 40 per cent of the total) will be separately identified and distributed in a discriminatory fashion — one favouring the universities more successful at research.

One obvious danger, a kind of educational Gresham's law, is that all the money will end up in the universities that teach students cheaply, but do little about their education. But the UFC has thought of that: account is to be taken of the quality of the education provided in different fields of study by various universities. Just how that may (or might) be done could be clarified by the letters to be sent out later in the year. The UFC seems to be hoping that, by then, a formula involving variables such as the opinions of external examiners, students' appraisals of their teachers and — possibly — the opinions of inspectors, will provide objective yardsticks of educational per-

formance. Academics already aware of the injustices of the use of citation indices in assessing research performance will give a hollow laugh, especially if they are near retirement age. Quite how the untested (and still unconstructed) yardsticks of educational performance should be used to modulate the numbers in different denominations thrown up by the separate bids for students of the universities may be a useful exercise for the few philosophers left in academic posts.

The new system, still only a declaration of intent, cannot but have a profound effect on British universities. One objective is to give universities an incentive to compete against each other for students — not in itself a bad thing — but the result of failure (or even success) will often be to skew institutions in directions that are educationally undesirable — too much (or probably too little) physics, too much accountancy and economics. The new system will also entail the *de facto* breakup of Britain's two federal universities (London and Wales), where it is unthinkable that colleges offering a universal range of courses will allow their chances to be miffed by head offices. There is bound to be a frightful row about the extra costs of Oxbridge teaching arising from the separation between the colleges and the universities. And the competition will not be really free: London costs are higher than elsewhere, which will have to be allowed for.

The most serious objection to this scheme is not that it is still half-baked, or even that competitions within the genteel system of British universities is in some way wrong, but that if competition is considered necessary, this is the wrong way in which to bring it about. If British universities were not almost entirely dependent on state funds, they would already be competing cheerfully, and would have reached some kind of dynamic equilibrium. So why not simulate that state of affairs? Two models have been much discussed. Notional sums of money could be attached to students in different fields, who could then pick and choose among the institutions offering them student places, or the institutions could be given the equivalent of an endowment (an assured income) and encouraged to spend it as they chose. Each has deficiencies, but none so serious as the basic error of what the UFC is now attempting — the micro-management of British universities with the help of yardsticks of which the only certainty is that they will (when designed) be inappropriate to higher education.

After such a long period of deprivation, British academics are not in a mood to answer back. But they should. The committees on the assessment of academic performance will soon be at work, manned dutifully by academics. Why do they not refuse to do the work, on the grounds that whatever yardsticks are devised must make for nonsense and injustice? There is a view that people with expertise in, say, chemical warfare should not work at the development of chemical weapons. Why should academics, even those who favour competition, assist a process that must undermine the health of British universities, and the welfare of those who work in them. □