

smuggled drugs should be seized when found so long as they remain illegal. But there are many places in which the use of narcotics is still so modest that its further growth would most effectively be restrained by some system in which registered users can be licitly supplied — and given such help as there is. The British system for dealing with morphine and heroin addicts in such a way was too hastily abandoned 20 years ago when a single physician was found to be rashly over-subscribing. Paradoxically, the place to restart is with the hardest drugs, and where addiction is least prevalent. Even the United States would benefit if some government were to give that strategy a try. □

The Matthew principle

The managers of Britain's universities need devices for offsetting the attractions of successful institutions.

AT the beginning of another academic year, it is natural enough that the attention researchers pay to the last research meetings of the season should be inclined to wander, but British academics are more likely to let their thoughts wander than those from elsewhere. They have a great deal on their minds, not least the outcome of the long and elaborate survey of research performance at British universities (costing about £4 million) begun by the University Grants Committee and published two weeks ago by its successor, the Universities (no apostrophe) Funding Council (UFC). The objective, as the covering letter to university vice-chancellors explains, is to "inform" them about UFC's decisions about public subvention of particular universities in next year's academic year and in the succeeding four-year period. People will be anxious to know as soon as possible not only how their own departments showed in the assessments, but also how rival departments elsewhere are rated to have performed. Their future as researchers may depend on what the figures show.

But there are few surprises. The assessment is concerned exclusively with original research, not with teaching or with unoriginal contract work for outsiders. Assessments have been carried out by panels of active academics together with a sprinkling of retired people on the basis of information supplied by university departments through their universities. UFC says that more attention has been paid to research output — publications — than in previous exercises on a smaller scale by UFC's predecessor, but the details of how that has been done will not be arguable until the new academic year is well under way (but then there are certain to be ructions). And the result? Britain has two institutions with all-round excellence in research — Cambridge and Oxford. Some others (such as Imperial and University colleges, both part of the University of London) run them close. Then there is a solid core of civic universities (typified by Manchester) whose research performance is creditable on UFC's five-point

scale. And then there are stragglers in plenty.

Academics everywhere will know the explanation — it is nothing but the working of the Matthew principle of "To him who hath shall be given...". Potentially able people naturally seek posts at universities with a reputation in research and, equally, are sought to fill them. But a university already strong in research is usually better able to provide its members with opportunities for research while its reputation inevitably rubs off on them when, for example, they apply for research grants. What UFC now plans is that the Matthew principle shall be reinforced by a system under which the universities that are already strong will be further strengthened with resources at the expense of weaker places elsewhere. There is nothing intrinsically evil in that decision; it is only equitable that strong research universities should be given the resources required to match their unavoidable overheads. But the result must be to reinforce their primacy further.

Yet UFC has (or should have) a wider interest to ensure that universities further down the pecking order have a continuing opportunity to improve their research performance and thereby, for as long as British universities must depend on public funds, their income. How will that be accomplished? Much will depend on the way in which future public subvention of universities is "informed" by this year's assessments. There will be a temptation for UFC to assert that the research output of some university departments is so meagre that they should give up trying, perhaps concentrating on teaching instead.

That would carry the Matthew principle too far and confirm today's high-fliers in their present positions for the rest of time. At the very least, UFC needs to keep back some of its funds in each of the next several years so as to back research initiatives at the now less well favoured universities. But it must also make plain its determination to help the second and even third-rate institutions become first-rate if they can. One practical objective must be to keep the system competitive. Another, more subtle, stems from the reason why many academics follow what is (in Britain) a badly paid and generally thankless profession: there is always the opportunity for research. If that should ever disappear, many of the universities destined to become more concerned with teaching than research will quickly find themselves bereft of teachers.

The chances are that neither the British government nor the committees such as UFC which it appoints to do its work are conscious of that danger. Certainly the government, believing as it does that academics are layabouts and persuaded by its disdainful convictions that everybody else would wish to be a layabout if he had the chance, behaves as if the supply of academics is literally endless. The logic is faultless, but the premises are wrong. Even academics will not endlessly put up with the self-abnegation required of British academics in the past decade. Push them a little harder and they will move into the City of London — or even politics. How will UFC plan for that. □