

Business-like universities

SWEDEN'S universities have become swept up in the government's enthusiasm for privatization. Later this month the Parliament is due to give final approval to a new higher education law, coming into effect next year, under which virtually all the internal administration of the universities will be freed of state control.

The key words in the government's justification for this radical move are expressed in the title of the original bill: *Quality through freedom*. Decentralized responsibility, it hopes, will encourage greater competition both between and within universities. And both will give universities and their faculty members the incentive to raise the quality and social relevance of their research. "We are changing from a collective to an individual system" as one university scientist puts it.

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the change. Some researchers are concerned that the result will be increased vulnerability to short-term pressures, in particular from Swedish industry. Others fear that the concentration of effort on specific research areas through the creation of centres of excellence (one of the government's key objectives) will reduce the scope for cross-disciplinary cooperation. But the government is determined to establish the law as part of its strategy to shift from a "welfare state" to a "market state" model for the economy.

There are six main universities in Sweden: Göteborg, Linköping, Lund, Stockholm, Umeå and Uppsala. At present, all are run according to procedures established by the state in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, they are required to conform to legally determined forms of internal organization, teaching salaries are negotiated centrally with the state, and parliament has to approve the creation of new university chairs.

In future, such decisions will be made locally. The government will appoint the board of a university (including industrialists) and the university's president and rector. But these will in turn be responsible for the way in which the university is organized.

There will be also be a big change in the way in which public resources are allocated to universities. Previously, this was done centrally by a government body, the National Board of Universities and Colleges (UHA). The board, however, has now been abolished. In future, each university will negotiate its annual grant directly with the government, based on a contract under which the university will promise to provide a certain number of undergraduate and courses in specified subjects.

It will then be up to the individual

university itself to decide how to meet the terms of its contract in the most cost-effective way. A university's research activities will be agreed in a similar way. But rather than detailed targets, the contract with the government will specify objectives, for example that the university concerned will perform research in particular fields, produce a specific number of postdoctoral students over a certain period of time, and so on.

Government officials claim that the changes will make it easier for universities to work in what they describe as a "business-like" way, and that this in itself will make it easier to respond to the needs of Swedish industry.

They also hope that, by emphasizing research excellence and productivity in the way that contracts are awarded, they will encourage universities to use the same approach internally. "For example, we are trying to find ways of stimulating quality in science by giving special bonuses to those who turn out more high quality PhD students," says Håkon Eriksson of the Karolinska Institute, who has been advising the government on its new research strategy. "The signal we are giving is that universities should develop similar ways of working."

The need for reform is generally recognized in the universities. There is a widespread feeling that many university departments have grown unwieldy, and that their administration needs to be streamlined, for example through organization into larger administrative units and thus fewer coordinating committees. The new law will make such changes easier to implement.

But there are also concerns about some of the implications of the government's policy. "It is a good thing that the government wants to encourage excellence in research," says Sven Kullander, professor of high energy physics at the University of Uppsala, and dean of the faculty of mathematics and physical science. "But we don't like the idea of centres of excellence, since there is a danger that these will become cut off from the cross-fertilization that is so fruitful in broad-based university departments."

Others claim that there seems to be a contradiction between statements by the government that it wants universities to have more autonomy, and its desire that their activities become more directly linked to the needs of industry.

On the political front, the reforms have been opposed by the Social Democrats in parliament, who argue that they will encourage elitist attitudes and undermine Sweden's traditions of egalitarianism. The government, however, is making no apologies about doing precisely this. □

Support from the workers

IT'S not often that a pot of gold falls into the research community's lap. But this could happen in Sweden early in the new year, following a promise by the government to distribute up to one third of a SKr20 billion (£2 billion) fund, built up in the 1980s through a levy on industry, to support industrially related research.

The so-called Workers Fund was set up in the early 1980s by the Social Democrat government of the time as a tax on salaries. Since the money raised was subsequently invested in the stock market, many saw the fund developing into a political lever over Swedish industry. So when the present conservative-led coalition came to power in October 1991, one of its first moves was to fulfil a pre-election pledge to drop the requirement on companies to contribute to the



New science minister Per Unckel — seeking new ways of paying for research.

fund, and to distribute its proceeds.

Precise details of how the research community will benefit are due to be published in February in the three-year science policy bill. Government officials say their preferred solution is to use the money to endow four or five private research foundations, each of which would be responsible for distributing the investment income (and perhaps some of the capital itself) to support projects in a particular field of research in ways that are of interest to Swedish industry.

Since the original promise was made earlier this year, the government has received a steady stream of proposals about how the money should be spent. The Swedish drug industry, for example, has submitted a list of ideas for long-term research projects, ranging from drug delivery systems to glycobiology. The Medical Research Council has also submitted a list of ideas (and has subsequently come under fire for the extent to which some of these appeared to reflect the interests of individual council members).

Overlapping with many of these proposals, the National Board for Industrial and Technical Development (NUTEK)