

Towards a European university system

Soon, the European Commission's writ should run to higher education. Present arguments in France about the constitution of universities point to the need for a coherent European policy in the field.

ONE of the paradoxes of contemporary Europe is that, while "ever closer union" is happening, if fitfully, nobody quite knows what will become of Europe's universities. That is a strange oversight, given the value that Europeans, like others, attach to higher education not merely as a means of educating their young but also as a source of culture, scholarship and innovation. But the oversight must be deliberate. The Treaty of Rome, 40 years ago, said nothing about universities. The European Single Act of 1986 mentioned research, but not higher education. The Maastricht Treaty, yet to be ratified, will enable the European Commission to take an interest in educational affairs, but only within terms of reference defined from time to time by the member states of the European Communities (EC). Meanwhile, member governments set about the reform of their own systems in isolation from each other and sometimes, to judge from the report from France on page 5 of this issue, by reaction against what they think has happened elsewhere.

The continent that invented the idea of the university can surely do better than that. The case of the French universities is a good illustration of the need. Republican tradition had established the right to equal access long before the traumatic upheavals of 1968 reminded the authorities that students are not mere ciphers. Since then, the French system has been securely launched towards self-betterment. The funding of the system has been generous; the appearance of Napoleonic centrism notwithstanding, universities have grown to differ from each other under the pressure of serving their students' needs; and scholarly ambitions have been greatly magnified. Left to itself, the French system would probably evolve into a pattern as diverse as any. The present argument about the formal devolution of authority from the centre to individual universities sounds specious.

That is not entirely the case. Countries with centralized university systems derive some benefits from the arrangement, France more than most. Uniform conditions of entry can be defined, teaching standards can be maintained by external invigilation and the merits of qualifications can be determined with a degree of objectivity not otherwise attainable. France has given the rest of the world a lesson by its arrangements for prequalifying entrants to research degree courses, which avoid much waste (of people as well as money). But there are drawbacks to centralism for all. One is bureaucracy. Another is the difficulty of legislating for outstanding universities within a supposedly uniform system; Japan, for example, will not have an outstanding

university until the twin constraints of its ministries of education and of finance are loosened.

The lesson to be learned from that may seem a weasel compromise, but is good sense; national university systems need to be a mixture of differently constituted institutions, some free to follow elitist paths, others more tightly constrained by what their paymasters believe are the benefits to be derived from their continued existence. For what it is worth, even France has a good approximation of such a system: what are the *grandes écoles* but frankly elitist institutions? Republicans delude themselves if they believe otherwise simply because Napoleon had a hand in founding them.

That points to a role for the European Commission in fostering higher education in Europe. Starting from the position that Europe's national governments will not readily or quickly give up their fondness for managing universities (but in Germany, responsibility rests with the *Länder* governments, as in Switzerland with the cantons), the Commission could usefully set out to foster (and even partially to finance) those institutions already so independent and international in outlook that they could function as if they were already European universities. It would not be unreasonable to require, in return, freedom of access by all European students and the recruitment of teachers from all over.

Those of despondent habit will say that it would be politically impracticable to set out on such a course, given the general wish of governments to get back more from the common enterprises to which they belong than they contribute to them. But that is not necessarily the case. Some would even find it helpful with the endless problem of marrying the pursuit of egalitarianism and elitism. Others, of generous disposition, would benefit from knowing that some at least of their students had found their way to more excellent places than there were at home. Still others would find it convenient to have models their own institutions and academics could emulate. If the Commission played its cards tactfully, it could successfully launch a scheme like this. The greatest difficulty would be to avoid replacing control by national government by control from Brussels.

The case for following this course, with all its risk, is broader. Everywhere in Europe, the cost of higher education is an increasing embarrassment, partly because of enlarged demand, and the quality of even outstanding institutions may be eroded by the pressures of chronic penny-pinching, a recipe for making sure that Europe will lack universities that match its own ambitions. That would be a great misfortune. □