

# East Europe 'needs sustainable universities'

**Bratislava.** "Develop your own university systems — but learn from the mistakes we made in the West." This was the message from a public forum held last week by TERC, a body setup by the European Commission to help restructure the higher education systems of post-communist east central Europe.

Since its establishment at the Vienna-based Institute for Human Sciences in 1991, TERC — its full name is Transformation of the National Higher Education and Research Systems of Central Europe — has carried out various projects aimed at establishing links between scientists and policy makers in their countries, and at boosting communication between countries.

One such initiative of TERC's 15-strong expert committee, chaired by former European Commissioner Lord Dahrendorf and including representatives from both East and West, is the establishment of regular public forums. The second of these, held in Slovakia's capital Bratislava last weekend, addressed the extent to which the East should try to reproduce the systems of higher education and research in the West.

The consensus view was that copying is not appropriate. But it was also emphasized that the new democracies need to establish systems that are sustainable — as the old democracies have learnt to their cost.

When demand for higher education in western Europe mushroomed in the 1970s, many countries found themselves unable to cope because their higher education sector was insufficiently diversified. In Italy and Germany, for example, universities were forced to bear the strain of growing student numbers almost single handedly.

In Germany, where numbers grew from 658,000 in 1972 to 1.74 million today (discounting the new states), only in the last few years has the government taken steps to introduce alternative, more vocationally-oriented higher education establishments, such as the Fachhochschule and the Berufsakademie.

## Chemist to head Canadian science council

**Ottawa.** An inorganic chemist who arrived in Canada from England almost 30 years ago has been appointed president of the National Research Council of Canada (NRC) for a five-year term.

Arthur Carty, dean of research at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, since 1989, acknowledged last week that he plans to seek increased, stable funding for NRC and to formulate a long-term strategic plan in the context of the government's forthcoming science and technology review.

Carty also acknowledged that "there is a morale problem" at NRC resulting from the

Dahrendorf warned that the economic success of east central European countries will inevitably spawn mass demand for higher education. The structures being established now should therefore be as diversified as possible, he said.

Umberto Colombo, former Italian minister for research and universities, suggested that much could be learnt from the recent experience in Italy, which is fighting to repair 40 years of damage caused by corrupt practices.

Not only has Italy faced a threefold increase in student numbers and a near doubling of the number of universities since the 1960s, but it has also suffered an eastern-style problem of rigid central control of universities.

In his brief period as minister in the last government, Colombo introduced a series of reforms which included giving financial autonomy to universities, and reducing subsidies to students.

But Colin Campbell, president of the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, said that the new democracies should not give in to pressure to introduce reforms too hastily. He warned that "some American campuses paid an enormous price" for the reforms to the university system that followed the student unrest in the 1960s.

The US reforms were necessary because the system of teaching had been too rigid, he said. But they had moved too fast, and standards at many university campuses had fallen as a result.

Does east central Europe want — or need — advice from the West? The answer was a definite yes, particularly as every country has found that its attempts to introduce workable democratic structures have been fraught with difficulties.

Compromises have been forced on science policy makers by academic communities committed in principle to democracy, but highly resistant to change. Clashes within these communities over the redistribution of power — and an instinctive reaction against

restructuring and budget cuts of the past five years. He says that one of his first priorities will be to try to restore stability through consultations with those involved.

Carty received his doctorate from the University of Nottingham and has held visiting professorships in France and Italy. The former NRC president, Pierre Perron, resigned last August, almost a year before his five-year mandate was scheduled to end, complaining of deep budget cuts and "anaemic support of research and development" by the federal government.

**David Spurgeon**

any form of state control — have both delayed reform.

A few weeks ago, for example, a new higher education bill, drafted by a committee headed by Juraj Švec, rector of Slovakia's most prestigious university, the Comenius, was thrown out by the academic community which objected strongly to his proposal that

IMAGE  
UNAVAILABLE  
FOR COPYRIGHT  
REASONS

**Czech universities are among those facing pressure to reform.**

rectors — rather than faculty deans — should be the key power holders in universities.

The 1990 Universities Act in Czechoslovakia gave complete autonomy to faculties. This has made it impossible for rectors to run their universities in a way that makes it possible to drive through much-needed reforms (see *Nature* 368, 283; 1994).

Švec says his proposed bill suggested structures that are "obvious in the West", and had indeed been approved by a Council of Europe delegation visiting Slovakia last March. But others saw the bill as too much of a 'centralist model', leaving open the danger that a rector could misuse his or her power.

Objections to the proposals were so strong that the senate of Comenius university briefly considered taking steps to remove Švec from his position as rector. Ironically, however, the same senate accepted the appropriateness of the changes in a stable democracy — but not, apparently, in theirs.

"I can understand the mistrust," says Švec. "We lived in a schizophrenic society for so long we have all been infected by this mistrust." Compromises are now being sought, but it will take yet more time.

Švec, who is a member of the TERC expert committee, and former Slovak education minister Jan Pisut, both say that they welcome advice from the West. Pisut equates the present situation in east central Europe with that in western Europe in 1970, shortly after the students protests of 1968. "We should avoid the mistakes you have made since then," he told the forum last week.

**Alison Abbott**