

Who will pay for Britain's university teaching and research?

British universities and their medical schools are anxiously awaiting the government's response, promised in a White Paper later this year, to an independent report setting out wide-ranging proposals on the future shape of teaching and research in higher education.

In particular, many are keen to know whether the government will provide extra financial support for research equipment and other infrastructural elements, what additional accounting procedures it will require universities to adopt in return and whether it is prepared to back an implicit distinction between "teaching departments" and "research departments."

Most public discussion on the findings of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, a former head of the British Post Office, has focussed on its recommendations that students be required for the first time to pay their own maintenance costs and contribute towards their tuition fees (see box).

Less controversial, but equally significant for the institutions concerned, are its proposals for sustaining the strength and quality of university research. At heart is the future of the Dual Support System, under which universities receive part of their research funding from the Department for Education and Employment (DEE), and part through competitive grants from the six research councils.

Although Dearing himself admits that this system is "creaking," he rejected the advice that it should be abandoned. Instead, he urged the government to provide the research councils with £110 million (US\$176 million) a year in extra funding to improve the research infrastructure through increased overhead costs.

In return, universities would have to demonstrate that these funds were being used to pay legitimate overhead costs by increasing the transparency of their accounting procedures. "I do not think that the extra funding should be provided until they have worked out how this will be done," said Dearing.

Such a move would also encourage medical charities — a major source of biomedical research funding — to contribute to overhead costs. They are reluctant to do so at present because they are legally obliged to ensure that their funds

are used for specific medical objectives.

Many charities had been worried that Dearing would suggest they take on additional responsibilities for funding general research costs in universities (indeed, the Wellcome Trust had threatened to withdraw some of its university funding completely under such circumstances). They are hoping that the government will accept Dearing's proposals that this should not happen.

Separate proposals to increase the distinction between teaching- and research-oriented university departments by actively discouraging those with stronger teaching departments from applying for government research support, are causing concern.

Dearing proposes offering £500 per faculty member to departments which

choose not to apply for general research support from the DEE — and penalizing those who apply unsuccessfully by withdrawing this inducement. While committee members point out that the extra £500 could still be used by individual faculty members to carry out "private," rather than "corporate," research, many academics worry that this distinction could drive a wedge between the two aspects of university activity. "Maintaining close contact between teaching and research is essential, particularly in university medical schools," says Colin Smith, chairman of the medical academic staff committee of the British Medical Association. "We would be very unhappy to see any split between the two."

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Students to pay tuition fees

Proposals by the British government to require university students to pay their full maintenance costs and a proportion of their tuition fees could have a serious impact on the future recruitment of doctors, according to British Medical Association (BMA).

The BMA is pressing the government to find ways of easing the "disproportionate burden" that this would impose on medical students compared to those studying other subjects, because of their longer courses and reduced opportunity for vacation work.

"Ideally, we would like to see no tuition fees for medical courses, and a non-means tested bursary system," says Colin Smith of the University of Southampton, chairman of the BMA's medical academics committee. "As a basic minimum, we must ensure that the fees of low income students are paid, so that medicine can draw tomorrow's doctors from a wide variety of backgrounds."

The government currently pays all university tuition fees, and students are also entitled to a means-tested maintenance grant. The proposals for a radical reduction in this support were outlined in the government's immediate response to the Dearing inquiry (see above).

Dearing recommended solving university funding problems through an increased contribution from students since they are the ones most likely to benefit directly from a university education. He suggested that this be done primarily by requiring all students to pay £1000 (US\$1,600) a year towards tuition costs (equal to around 25 percent of real cost; the remainder would continue to be covered by the government), and that they should be able to take out deferred-repayment loans to help pay the new fee.

Although the government's detailed response will not be known until a White Paper on the future of higher education comes out later this year, David Blunkett, the Secretary for Education and Employment, has already told Parliament that he intends to go further by requiring students to pay their living costs as well.

The BMA says that the average five-year length of a medical course could mean graduates facing a debt of £25,000, which would be "a serious deterrent" to entering medicine. "This is not special pleading for a special group," says Smith. "It is special pleading for the future of the health service in this country."

The Department of Health, which would ultimately have to foot the bill through doctors' salaries, is already said to be holding discussions with the Treasury on special funding arrangements. Dearing recommended a bursary scheme, similar to that given to nurses, to help medical students.

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